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A ROMAN SINGER

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BY

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A ROMAN SINGER.

CHAPTER I.

BENONI had made an impression on me that nothing could efface. His tall thin figure and bright eyes got into my dreams and haunted me, so that I thought my nerves were affected. For several days I could think of nothing else, and at last had myself bled, and took some cooling barley-water, and gave up eating salad at night, but without any perceptible effect.

Nino wrote often, and seemed very much excited about the disappearance of the contessina, but what could I do? I asked every one I knew, and nobody had heard of them, so that at last I quite gave it over, and wrote to tell him so. A week passed, then a fortnight, and I had heard nothing from Benoni. Nino wrote again, inclos-

ing a letter addressed to the Contessina di Lira, which he implored me to convey to her, if I loved him. He said he was certain that she had never left Italy. Some instinct seemed to tell him so, and she was evidently in neither London nor Paris, for he had made every inquiry, and had even been to the police about it. Two days after this, Benoni came. He looked exactly as he did the first time I saw him.

"I have news," he said, briefly, and sat down in the arm-chair, striking the dust from his boot with his little cane.

"News of the Graf?" I inquired.

"Yes. I have found out something. They never left Italy at all, it seems. I am rather mystified, and I hate mystification. The old man is a fool; all old men are fools, excepting myself. Will you smoke? No? Allow me, then. It is a modern invention, but a very good one." He lit a cigarette. "I wish your Liras were in Tophet," he continued, presently. "How can people have the bad taste to hide? It only makes ingenious persons the more determined to find them." He seemed talkative, and as I was so sad and lonely

I encouraged him by a little stimulus of doubt. I wish I had doubted him sooner, and differently.

"What is the use?" I asked. "We shall never find them."

"'Never' is a great word," said Benoni. "You do not know what it means. I do. But as for finding them, you shall see. In the first place, I have talked with their banker. He says the count gave the strictest orders to have his address kept a secret. But, being one of my people, he allowed himself to make an accidental allusion which gave me a clue to what I wanted. They are hidden somewhere in the mountains."

"Diavolo! among the brigands, they will not be very well treated," said I.

"The old man will be careful. He will keep clear of danger. The only thing is to find them."

"And what then?" I asked.

"That depends on the most illustrious Signor Cardegna," said Benoni, smiling. "He only asked you to find them. He probably did not anticipate that I would help you."

It did not appear to me that Benoni had helped me much, after all. You might as well

look for a needle in a haystack as try to find any one who goes to the Italian mountains. The baron offered no further advice, and sat calmly smoking and looking at me. I felt uneasy, opposite him. He was a mysterious person, and I thought him disguised. It was really not possible that, with his youthful manner, his hair should be naturally so white, or that he should be so old as he seemed. I asked him the question we always find it interesting to ask foreigners, hoping to lead him into conversation.

"How do you like our Rome, Baron Benoni?"

"Rome? I loathe and detest it," he said, with a smile. "There is only one place in the whole world that I hate more."

"What place is that?" I asked, remembering that he had made the same remark to Nino before.

"Jerusalem," he answered, and the smile faded on his face. I thought I guessed the reason of his dislike in his religious views. But I am very liberal about those things.

"I think I understand you," I said; "you are a Hebrew, and the prev[illegible]ng form of religion is disagreeable to you."

"No, it is not exactly that,—and yet, perhaps it is." He seemed to be pondering on the reason of his dislike.

"But why do you visit these places if they do not please you?"

"I come here because I have so many agreeable acquaintances. I never go to Jerusalem. I also come here from time to time to take a bath. The water of the Trevi has a peculiarly rejuvenating effect upon me, and something impels me to bathe in it."

"Do you mean in the fountain? Ah, foreigners say that if you drink the water by moonlight you will return to Rome."

"Foreigners are all weak-minded fools. I like that word. The human race ought to be called fools generically, as distinguished from the more intelligent animals. If you went to England you would be as great a fool as any Englishman that comes here and drinks Trevi water by moonlight. But I assure you I do nothing so vulgar as to patronise the fountain, any more than I would patronise Mazzarino's church, hard by. I go to the source, the spring, the well where it rises."

"Ah, I know the place well," I said. "It is near to Serveti."

"Serveti? Is not that in the vicinity of Horace's villa?"

"You know the country well, I see," said I, sadly.

"I know most things," answered the Jew, with complacency. "You would find it hard to hit upon anything I do not know. Yes, I am a vain man, it is true, but I am very frank and open about it. Look at my complexion. Did you ever see anything like it? It is Trevi water that does it." I thought such excessive vanity very unbecoming in a man of his years, but I could not help looking amused. It was so odd to hear the old fellow descanting on his attractions. He actually took a small mirror from his pocket and looked at himself in most evident admiration.

"I really believe," he said at length, pocketing the little looking-glass, "that a woman might love me still. What do you say?"

"Doubtless," I answered politely, although I was beginning to be annoyed, "a woman might

love you at first sight. But it would be more dignified for you not to love her."

"Dignity!" He laughed long and loud, a cutting laugh, like the breaking of glass. "There is another of your phrases. Excuse my amusement, Signor Grandi, but the idea of dignity always makes me smile." He called that thing a smile! "It is in everybody's mouth,—the dignity of the state, the dignity of the king, the dignity of woman, the dignity of father, mother, schoolmaster, soldier. Psh! an apoplexy, as you say, on all the dignities you can enumerate. There is more dignity in a poor patient ass toiling along a rough road under a brutal burden than in the entire human race put together, from Adam to myself. The conception of dignity is notional, most entirely. I never see a poor wretch of a general, or king, or any such animal, adorned in his toggery of dignity without laughing at him, and his dignity again leads him to suppose that my smile is the result of the pleasurable sensations his appearance excites in me. Nature has dignity at times; some animals have it; but man, never. What man mistakes

for it in himself is his vanity,—a vanity much more pernicious than mine, because it deceives its possessor, who is also wholly possessed by it, and is its slave. I have had a great many illusions in my life, Signor Candi."

"One would say, baron, that you had parted with them."

"Yes, and that is my chief vanity,—the vanity of vanities which I prefer to all the others. It is only a man of no imagination who has no vanity. He cannot imagine himself any better than he is. A creative genius makes for his own person a 'self' which he thinks he is, or desires other people to believe him to be. It makes little difference whether he succeeds or not, so long as he flatters himself he does. He complacently takes all his images from the other animals, or from natural objects and phenomena, depicting himself bold as an eagle, brave as a lion, strong as an ox, patient as an ass, vain as a popinjay, talkative as a parrot, wily as a serpent, gentle as a dove, cunning as a fox, surly as a bear; his glance is lightning, his voice thunder, his heart stone, his hands are iron, his conscience

a hell, his sinews of steel, and his love like fire. In short, he is like anything alive or dead, except a man, saving when he is mad. Then he is a fool. Only man can be a fool. It distinguishes him from the higher animals."

I cannot describe the unutterable scorn that blazed in his eyes as Benoni poured out the vials of his wrath on the unlucky human race. With my views, we were not likely to agree in this matter.

"Who are you?" I asked. "What right can you possibly have to abuse us all in such particularly strong terms? Do you ever make proselytes to your philosophy?"

"No," said he, answering my last question, and recovering his serenity with that strange quickness of transition I had remarked when he had made music during his previous visit. "No, they all die before I have taught them anything."

"That does not surprise me, baron," said I. He laughed a little.

"Well, perhaps it would surprise you even less if you knew me better," he replied. "But

really, I came here to talk about Cardegna, and not to chatter about that contemptible creature, man, who is not worth a moment's notice, I assure you. I believe I can find these people, and I confess it would amuse me to see the old man's face when we walk in upon him. I must be absent for a few days on business in Austria, and shall return immediately, for I have not taken my bath yet, that I spoke of. Now, if it is agreeable to you, I would propose that we go to the hills, on my return, and prosecute our search together; writing to Nino in the meantime to come here as soon as he has finished his engagement in Paris. If he comes quickly, he may go with us; if not, he can join us. At all events, we can have a very enjoyable tour among the natives, who are charming people, quite like animals, as you ought to know."

I think I must be a very suspicious person. Circumstances have made me so, and perhaps my suspicions are very generally wrong. It may be. At all events I did suspect the rich and dandified old baron of desiring to have a laugh by putting Nino into some absurd situation.

He had such strange views, or, at least, he talked so oddly, that I did not believe half he said. It is not possible that anybody should seriously hold the opinions he professed.

When he was gone I sat alone, pondering on the situation, which was like a very difficult problem in a nightmare, that could not or would not look sensible, do what I would. It chanced that I got a letter from Nino that evening, and I confess I was reluctant to open it, fearing that he would reproach me with not having taken more pains to help him. I felt as though, before opening the envelope, I should like to go back a fortnight and put forth all my strength to find the contessina, and gain a comforting sense of duty performed. If I had only done my best, how easy it would have been to face a whole sheet of complaints! Meanwhile the letter was come, and I had done nothing worth mentioning. I looked at the back of it, and my conscience smote me; but it had to be accomplished, and at last I tore the cover off and read.

Poor Nino! He said he was ill with anxiety, and feared it would injure his voice. He said

that to break his engagement and come back to Rome would be ruin to him. He must face it out, or take the legal consequences of a breach of contract, which are overwhelming to a young artist. He detailed all the efforts he had made to find Hedwig, pursuing every little sign and clue that seemed to present itself; all to no purpose. The longer he thought of it, the more certain he was that Hedwig was not in Paris or London. She might be anywhere else in the whole world, but she was certainly not in either of those cities. Of that he was convinced. He felt like a man who had pursued a beautiful image to the foot of a precipitous cliff; the rock had opened and swallowed up his dream, leaving him standing alone in hopeless despair; and a great deal more poetic nonsense of that kind.

I do not believe I had ever realised what he so truly felt for Hedwig until I sat at my table with his letter before me, overcome with the sense of my own weakness in not having effectually checked this mad passion at its rise; or, since it had grown so masterfully, of my wretched procrastination in not having taken my staff in

my hand and gone out into the world to find the woman my boy loved and bring her to him. By this time, I thought, I should have found her. I could not bear to think of his being ill, suffering, heart-broken,—ruined, if he lost his voice by an illness,—merely because I had not had the strength to do the best thing for him. Poor Nino, I thought, you shall never say again that Cornelio Grandi has not done what was in his power to make you happy.

"That baron! an apoplexy on him! has illuded me with his promises of help," I said to myself. "He has no more intention of helping me or Nino than he has of carrying off the basilica of St. Peter. Courage, Cornelio! thou must gird up thy loins, and take a little money in thy scrip, and find Hedwig von Lira."

All that night I lay awake, trying to think how I might accomplish this end; wondering to which point of the compass I should turn, and, above all, reflecting that I must make great sacrifices. But my boy must have what he wanted, since he was consuming himself, as we say, in longing for it. It seemed to me no time

for counting the cost, when every day might bring upon him a serious illness. If he could only know that I was acting, he would allow his spirits to revive and take courage.

In the watches of the night I thought over my resources, which, indeed, were meagre enough; for I am a very poor man. It was necessary to take a great deal of money, for once away from Rome no one could tell when I might return. My salary as professor is paid to me quarterly, and it was yet some weeks to the time when it was due. I had only a few francs remaining,—not more than enough to pay my rent and to feed Mariuccia and me. I had paid at Christmas the last instalment due on my vineyard out of Porta Salara, and though I owed no man anything I had no money, and no prospect of any for some time. And yet I could not leave home on a long journey without at least two hundred scudi in my pocket. A scudo is a dollar, and a dollar has five francs, so that I wanted a thousand francs. You see, in spite of the baron's hint about the mountains, I thought I might have to travel all over Italy before I satisfied Nino.

A thousand francs is a great deal of money, —it is a Peru, as we say. I had not the first sou toward it. I thought a long time. I wondered if the old piano were worth anything; whether anybody would give me money for my manuscripts, the results of patient years of labour and study; my old gold scarf pin, my seal ring, and even my silver watch, which keeps really very good time,—what were they worth? But it would not be much, not the tenth part of what I wanted. I was in despair, and I tried to sleep. Then a thought came to me.

"I am a donkey," I said. "There is the vineyard itself,—my little vineyard beyond Porta Salara. It is mine and is worth half as much again as I need." And I slept quietly till morning.

It is true, and I am sure it is natural, that in the daylight my resolution looked a little differently to me than it did in the quiet night. I had toiled and scraped a great deal more than you know to buy that small piece of land, and it seemed much more my own than all Serveti had ever been in my better days. Then I shut myself

up in my room and read Nino's letter over again, though it pained me very much; for I needed courage. And when I had read it, I took some papers in my pocket, and put on my hat and my old cloak, which Nino will never want any more now for his midnight serenades, and I went out to sell my little vineyard.

"It is for my boy," I said, to give myself some comfort.

But it is one thing to want to buy, and it is quite another thing to want to sell. All day I went from one man to another with my papers, —all the agents who deal in those things; but they only said they thought it might be sold in time; it would take many days, and perhaps weeks.

"But I want to sell it to-day," I explained.

"We are very sorry," said they, with a shrug of the shoulders; and they showed me the door.

I was extremely down-hearted, and though I could not sell my piece of land I spent three sous in buying two cigars to smoke, and I walked about the Piazza Colonna in the sun; I would not go home to dinner until I had decided

what to do. There was only one man I had not tried; and he was the man who had sold it to me. Of course I knew people who do this business, for I had had enough trouble to learn their ways when I had to sell Serveti, years ago. But this one man I had not tried yet, because I knew that he would drive a cruel bargain with me when he saw I wanted the money. But at last I went to him, and told him just what my wishes were.

"Well," he said, "it is a very bad time for selling land. But to oblige you, because you are a customer, I will give you eight hundred francs for your little place. That is really much more than I can afford."

"Eight hundred francs!" I exclaimed, in despair. "But I have paid you nearly twice as much for it in the last three years! What do you take me for? To sell such a gem of a vineyard for eight hundred francs! If you offer me thirteen hundred I will discuss the matter with you."

"I have known you a long time, Signor Grandi, and you are an honest man. I am sure

you do not wish to deceive me. I will give you eight hundred and fifty."

Deceive him, indeed! The very man who had received fifteen hundred from me said I deceived him when I asked thirteen hundred for the same piece of land! But I needed it very much, and so, bargaining and wrangling, I got one thousand and seventy-five francs in bank-notes; and I took care they should all be good ones too. It was a poor price, I know, but I could do no better, and I went home happy. But I dared not tell Mariuccia. She is only my servant, to be sure, but she would have torn me in pieces.

Then I wrote to the authorities at the university to say that I was obliged to leave Rome suddenly, and would of course not claim my salary during my absence. But I added that I hoped they would not permanently supplant me. If they did I knew I should be ruined. Then I told Mariuccia that I was going away for some days to the country, and I left her the money to pay the rent, and her wages, and a little more, so that she might be provided for if I were detained

very long. I went out again and telegraphed to Nino to say I was going at once in search of the Liras, and begging him to come home as soon as he should have finished his engagement.

To tell the truth, Mariuccia was very curious to know where I was going, and asked me many questions, which I had some trouble in answering. But at last it was night again, and the old woman went to bed and left me. Then I went on tiptoe to the kitchen, and found a skein of thread and two needles, and set to work.

I knew the country whither I was going very well, and it was necessary to hide the money I had in some ingenious way. So I took two waistcoats—one of them was quite good still,—and I sewed them together, and basted the bank-notes between them. It was a clumsy piece of tailoring, though it took me so many hours to do it. But I had put the larger waistcoat outside very cunningly, so that when I had put on the two, you could not see that there was anything beneath the outer one. I think I was very clever to do this without a woman to help me. Then I looked to my boots, and chose my oldest

clothes,—and you may guess, from what you know of me, how old they were,—and I made a little bundle that I could carry in my hand, with a change of linen, and the like. These things I made ready before I went to bed, and I slept with the two waistcoats and the thousand francs under my pillow, though I suppose nobody would have chosen that particular night for robbing me.

All these preparations had occupied me so much that I had not found any time to grieve over my poor little vineyard that I had sold; and besides, I was thinking all the while of Nino, and how glad he would be to know that I was really searching for Hedwig. But when I thought of the vines, it hurt me; and I think it is only long after the deed that it seems more blessed to give than to receive.

But at last I slept, as tired folk will, leaving care to the morrow; and when I awoke it was daybreak, and Mariuccia was clattering angrily with the tin coffee-pot outside. It was a bright morning, and the goldfinch sang, and I could hear him scattering the millet seed about his cage while I dressed. And then the parting

grew very near, and I drank my coffee silently, wondering how soon it would be over, and wishing that the old woman would go out and let me have my house alone. But she would not, and, to my surprise, she made very little worry or trouble, making a great show of being busy. When I was quite ready she insisted on putting a handful of roasted chestnuts into my pocket, and she said she would pray for me. The fact is, she thought, foolish old creature as she is, that I was old and in poor health, and she had often teased me to go into the country for a few days, so that she was not ill pleased that I should seem to take her advice. She stood looking after me as I trudged along the street, with my bundle and my good stick in my right hand, and a lighted cigar in my left.

I had made up my mind that I ought first to try the direction hinted at by the baron, since I had absolutely no other clue to the whereabouts of the Count von Lira and his daughter. I therefore got into the old stage that still runs to Palestrina and the neighbouring towns, for it is almost as quick as going by rail, and much

cheaper; and half an hour later we rumbled out of the Porta San Lorenzo, and I had entered upon the strange journey to find Hedwig von Lira, concerning which frivolous people have laughed so unkindly. And you may call me a foolish old man if you like. I did it for my boy.

CHAPTER II.

I WENT to Palestrina because all foreigners go there, and are to be heard of from other parts of the mountains in that place. It was a long and tiresome journey; the jolting stage-coach shook me very much. There was a stout woman inside, with a baby that squealed; there was a very dirty old country curate, who looked as though he had not shaved for a week, or changed his collar for a month. But he talked intelligently, though he talked too much, and he helped to pass the time until I was weary of him. We jolted along over the dusty roads, and were at least thankful that it was not yet hot.

In the evening we reached Palestrina, and stopped before the inn in the market-place, as tired and dusty as might be. The woman went one way, and the priest the other, and I was left

alone. I soon found the fat old host, and engaged a room for the night. He was talkative and curious, and sat by my side when he had prepared my supper in the dingy dining-room down-stairs. I felt quite sure that he would be able to tell me what I wanted, or at least to give me a hint from hearsay. But he at once began to talk of last year, and how much better his business had been then than it was now, as country landlords invariably do.

It was to no purpose that I questioned him about the people that had passed during the fortnight, the month, the two months back; it was clear that no one of the importance of my friends had been heard of. At last I was tired, and he lit a wax candle, which he would carefully charge in the bill afterwards, at double its natural price, and he showed me the way to my room. It was a very decent little room, with white curtains and a good bed and a table,—everything I could desire. A storm had come up since I had been at my supper, and it seemed a comfortable thing to go to bed, although I was disappointed at having got no news.

But when I had blown out my candle, determining to expostulate with the host in the morning if he attempted to make me pay for a whole one, I lay thinking of what I should do; and, turning on my side, I observed that a narrow crack of the door admitted rays of light into the darkness of my chamber. Now I am very sensitive to draughts and inclined to take cold, and the idea that there was a door open troubled me, so that at last I made up my mind to get up and close it. As I rose to my feet, I perceived that it was not the door by which I had entered; and so, before shutting it, I called out, supposing there might be some one in the next room.

"Excuse me," I said, loudly, "I will shut this door." But there was no reply.

Curiosity is perhaps a vice, but it is a natural one. Instead of pulling the door to its place, I pushed it a little, knocking with my knuckles at the same time. But as no one answered, I pushed it further, and put in my head. It was a disagreeable thing I saw.

The room was like mine in every way, save

that the bed was moved to the middle of the open space, and there were two candles on two tables. On the bed lay a dead man. I felt what we call a brivido,—a shiver like an ague.

It was the body of an old man, with a face like yellow wax, and a singularly unpleasant expression even in death. His emaciated hands were crossed on his breast, and held a small black crucifix. The candles stood, one at the head and one at the foot, on little tables. I entered the room and looked long at the dead old man. I thought it strange that there should be no one to watch him, but I am not afraid of dead men, after the first shudder is past. It was a ghastly sight enough, however, and the candles shed a glaring, yellowish light over it all.

"Poor wretch," I said to myself, and went back to my room, closing the door carefully behind me.

At first I thought of rousing the host, and explaining to him my objections to being left almost in the same room with a corpse. But I reflected that it would be foolish to seem afraid of it, when I was really not at all timid, and so

I went to bed and slept until dawn. But when I went down-stairs I found the innkeeper, and gave him a piece of my mind.

"What sort of an inn do you keep? What manners are these?" I cried, angrily. "What diavolo put into your pumpkin head to give me a sepulchre for a room?"

He seemed much disturbed at what I said, and broke out into a thousand apologies. But I was not to be so easily pacified.

"Do you think," I demanded, "that I will ever come here again, or advise any of my friends to come here? It is insufferable. I will write to the police——" But at this he began to shed tears and to wring his hands, saying it was not his fault.

"You see, signore, it was my wife who made me arrange it so. Oh! these women—the devil has made them all! It was her father—the old dead man you saw. He died yesterday morning, —may he rest!—and we will bury him to-day. You see every one knows that unless a dead man is watched by some one from another town his soul will not rest in peace. My wife's father

was a jettatore; he had the evil eye, and people knew it for miles around, so I could not persuade any one from the other villages to sit by him and watch his body, though I sent everywhere all day yesterday. At last that wife of mine—maledictions on her folly!—said, 'It is my father, after all, and his soul must rest, at any price. If you put a traveller in the next room, and leave the door open, it will be the same thing; and so he will be in peace.' 'That is the way it happened, signore," he continued, after wiping away his tears; "you see I could not help it at all. But if you will overlook it, I will not make any charges for your stay. My wife shall pay me. She has poultry by the hundred. I will pay myself with her chickens."

"Very good," said I, well pleased at having got so cheap a lodging. "But I am a just man, and I will pay for what I have eaten and drunk, and you can take the night's lodging out of your wife's chickens, as you say." So we were both satisfied.[1]

The storm of the night had passed away,

[1] This incident actually occurred, precisely as related.

leaving everything wet and the air cool and fresh. I wrapped my cloak about me and went into the market-place to see if I could pick up any news. It was already late, for the country, and there were few people about. Here and there, in the streets, a wine-cart was halting on its way to Rome, while the rough carter went through the usual arrangement of exchanging some of his employer's wine for food for himself, filling up the barrel with good pure water, that never hurt any one. I wandered about, though I could not expect to see any face that I knew; it is so many years since I lived at Serveti that even were the carters from my old place I should have forgotten how they looked. Suddenly, at the corner of a dirty street, where there was a little blue and white shrine to the Madonna, I stumbled against a burly fellow with a gray beard, carrying a bit of salt codfish in one hand and a cake of corn bread in the other, eating as he went.

"Gigi!" I cried, in delight, when I recognised the old carrettiere who used to bring me grapes and wine, and still does when the fancy takes him.

"Dio mio! Signor Conte!" he cried, with his mouth full, and holding up the bread and fish with his two hands, in astonishment. When he recovered himself he instantly offered to share his meal with me, as the poorest wretch in Italy will offer his crust to the greatest prince, out of politeness. "Vuol favorire?" he said, smiling.

I thanked him and declined, as you may imagine. Then I asked him how he came to be in Palestrina; and he told me that he was often there in the winter, as his sister had married a vine-dresser of the place, of whom he bought wine occasionally. Very well-to-do people, he explained, eagerly, proud of his prosperous relations.

We clambered along through the rough street together, and I asked him what was the news from Serveti and from that part of the country, well knowing that if he had heard of any rich foreigners in that neighbourhood he would at once tell me of it. But I had not much hope. He talked about the prospects of the vines, and such things, for some time, and I listened patiently.

"By the by," he said at last, "there is a

gran signore who is gone to live in Fillettino,—a crazy man, they say, with a beautiful daughter, but really beautiful, as an angel."

I was so much surprised that I made a loud exclamation.

"What is the matter?" asked Gigi.

"It is nothing, Gigi," I answered, for I was afraid lest he should betray my secret, if I let him guess it. "It is nothing. I struck my foot against a stone. But you were telling about a foreigner who is gone to live somewhere. Fillettino? Where is that?"

"Oh, the place of the diavolo! I do not wonder you do not know, conte, for gentlemen never go there. It is in the Abruzzi, beyond Trevi. Did you ever hear of the Serra di Sant' Antonio, where so many people have been killed?"

"Diana! I should think so! In the old days——"

"Bene," said Gigi, "Fillettino is there, at the beginning of the pass."

"Tell me, Gigi mio," I said, "are you not very thirsty?" The way to the heart of the wine carter lies through a pint measure. Gigi was

thirsty, as I supposed, and we sat down in the porch of my inn, and the host brought a stoup of his best wine and set it before us.

"I would like to hear about the crazy foreigner who is gone to live in the hills among the briganti," I said, when he had wet his throat.

"What I know I will tell you, Signor Conte," he answered, filling his pipe with bits that he broke off a cigar. "But I know very little. He must be a foreigner, because he goes to such a place; and he is certainly crazy, for he shuts his daughter in the old castle, and watches her as though she was made of wax, like the flowers you have in Rome under glass."

"How long have they been there, these queer folks?" I asked.

"What do I know? It may be a month or two. A man told me, who had come that way from Fucino, and that is all I know."

"Do people often travel that way, Gigi?"

"Not often, indeed," he answered, with a grin. "They are not very civil, the people of those parts." Gigi made a gesture, or a series of gestures. He put up his hands as though firing

a gun. Then he opened his right hand and closed it, with a kind of insinuating twirl of the fingers, which means "to steal." Lastly he put his hand over his eyes, and looked through his fingers as though they were bars, which means "prison." From this I inferred that the inhabitants of Fillettino were addicted to murder, robbery, and other pastimes, for which they sometimes got into trouble. The place he spoke of is about thirty miles, or something more, from Palestrina, and I began planning how I should get there as cheaply as possible. I had never been there, and wondered what kind of a habitation the count had found; for I knew it must be the roughest sort of mountain town, with some dilapidated castle or other overhanging it. But the count was rich, and he had doubtless made himself very comfortable. I sat in silence while Gigi finished his wine and chatted about his affairs between the whiffs of his pipe.

"Gigi," I said at last, "I want to buy a donkey."

"Eh, your excellency can be accommodated; and a saddle, too, if you wish."

"I think I could ride without a saddle," I said, for I thought it a needless piece of extravagance.

"Madonna mia!" he cried. "The Signor Conte ride bareback on a donkey! They would laugh at you. But my brother-in-law can sell you a beast this very day, and for a mere song."

"Let us go and see the beast," I said. I felt a little ashamed of having wished to ride without a saddle. But as I had sold all I had, I wanted to make the money last as long as possible; or at least I would spend as little as I could, and take something back, if I ever went home at all. We had not far to go, and Gigi opened a door in the street, and showed me a stable, in which something moved in the darkness. Presently he led out an animal and began to descant upon its merits.

"Did you ever see a more beautiful donkey?" asked Gigi, admiringly. "It looks like a horse!" It was a little ass, with sad eyes, and ears as long as its tail. It was also very thin, and had the hair rubbed off its back from carrying burdens. But it had no sore places, and did not seem lame.

"He is full of fire," said Gigi, poking the donkey in the ribs to excite a show of animation. "You should see him gallop uphill with my brother on his back, and a good load into the bargain. Brrrr! Stand still, will you!" he cried, holding tight by the halter, though the animal did not seem anxious to run away.

"And then," said Gigi, "he eats nothing,—positively nothing."

"He does not look as though he had eaten much of late," I said.

"Oh, my brother-in-law is as good to him as though he were a Christian. He gives him corn bread and fish, just like his own children. But this ass prefers straw."

"A frugal ass," I said, and we began to bargain. I will not tell you what I gave Gigi's brother-in-law for the beast, because you would laugh. And I bought an old saddle, too. It was really necessary, but it was a dear bargain, though it was cheaper than hiring; for I sold the donkey and the saddle again, and got back something.

It is a wild country enough that lies behind

the mountains towards the sources of the Aniene, —the river that makes the falls at Tivoli. You could not half understand how in these times, under the new government, and almost within a long day's ride from Rome, such things could take place as I am about to tell you of, unless I explained to you how very primitive that country is which lies to the south-east of the capital, and which we generally call the Abruzzi. The district is wholly mountainous, and though there are no very great elevations there are very ragged gorges and steep precipices, and now and then an inaccessible bit of forest far up among the rocks, which no man has ever thought of cutting down. It would be quite impossible to remove the timber. The people are mostly shepherds in the higher regions, where there are no vines, and when opportunity offers they will way-lay the unwary traveller and rob him, and even murder him, without thinking very much about it. In the old days the boundary between the Papal States and the kingdom of Naples ran through these mountains, and the contrabbandieri—the smugglers of all sorts of wares—used to cross

from one dominion to the other by circuitous paths and steep ways of which only a few had knowledge. The better known of these passes were defended by soldiers and police, but there have been bloody fights fought, within a few years, between the law and its breakers. Foreigners never penetrate into the recesses of these hills, and even the English guide-books, which are said to contain an account of everything that the Buon Dio ever made, compiled from notes taken at the time of the creation, make no mention of places which surpass in beauty all the rest of Italy put together.

No railroad or other modern innovation penetrates into those Arcadian regions, where the goatherd plays upon his pipe all the day long, the picture of peace and innocence, or prowls in the passes with a murderous long gun, if there are foreigners in the air. The women toil at carrying their scant supply of drinking-water from great distances during a part of the day, and in the evening they spin industriously by their firesides or upon their doorsteps, as the season will have it. It is an old life, the same to-day as a

thousand years ago, and perhaps as it will be a thousand years hence. The men are great travellers, and go to Rome in the winter to sell their cheese, or to milk a flock of goats in the street at daybreak, selling the foaming canful for a sou. But their visits to the city do not civilise them; the outing only broadens the horizon of their views in regard to foreigners, and makes them more ambitious to secure one, and see what he is like, and cut off his ears, and get his money. Do not suppose that the shepherd of the Abruzzi lies all day on the rocks in the sun, waiting for the foreign gentleman to come within reach. He might wait a long time. Climbing has strengthened the muscles of his legs into so much steel, and a party of herdsmen have been known to come down from the Serra to the plains around Velletri, and to return to their inaccessible mountains, after doing daring deeds of violence, in twenty-four hours from the time of starting, covering at least from eighty to ninety miles by the way. They are extraordinary fellows, as active as tigers, and fabulously strong, though they are never very big.

This country begins behind the range of Sabine mountains seen from Rome across the Campagna, and the wild character of it increases as you go towards the south-east. . .

Since I have told you this much I need not weary you with further descriptions. I do not like descriptions, and it is only when Nino gives me his impressions that I write them, in order that you may know how beautiful things impress him, and the better judge of his character.

I do not think that Gigi really cheated me so very badly about the donkey. Of course I do not believe the story of his carrying the brother-in-law and the heavy load uphill at a gallop; but I am thin and not very heavy, and the little ass carried me well enough through the valleys, and when we came to a steep place I would get off and walk, so as not to tire him too much. If he liked to crop a thistle or a blade of grass, I would stop a moment, for I thought he would grow fatter in that way, and I should not lose so much when I sold him again. But he never grew very fat.

Twice I slept by the way before I reached the end of my journey,—once at Olevano and once at Trevi; for the road from Olevano to Trevi is long, and some parts are very rough, especially at first. I could tell you just how every stone on the road looks—Rojate, the narrow pass beyond, and then the long valley with the vines; then the road turns away and rises as you go along the plateau of Arcinazzo, which is hollow beneath, and you can hear the echoes as you tread; then at the end of that the desperate old inn, called by the shepherds the Madre dei Briganti,—the mother of brigands,—smoke-blackened within and without, standing alone on the desolate heath; farther on, a broad bend of the valley to the left, and you see Trevi rising before you, crowned with an ancient castle, and overlooking the stream that becomes the Aniene afterwards; from Trevi through a rising valley that grows narrower at every step, and finally seems to end abruptly, as indeed it does, in a dense forest far up the pass. And just below the woods lies the town of Fillettino, where the road ends; for there is a road which leads to

Tivoli, but does not communicate with Olevano, whence I had come.

Of course I had made an occasional inquiry by the way, when I could do so without making people too curious. When any one asked me where I was going, I would say I was bound for Fucino, to buy beans for seed at the wonderful model farm that Torlonia has made by draining the old lake. And then I would ask about the road; and sometimes I was told there was a strange foreigner at Fillettino, who made everybody wonder about him by his peculiar mode of life. Therefore, when I at last saw the town, I was quite sure that the count was there, and I got off my little donkey, and let him drink in the stream, while I myself drank a little higher up. The road was dusty, and my donkey and I were thirsty.

I thought of all I would do, as I sat on the stone by the water and the beast cropped the wretched grass, and soon I came to the conclusion that I did not know in the least what I should do. I had unexpectedly found what I wanted, very soon, and I was thankful enough to

have been so lucky. But I had not the first conception of what course I was to pursue when once I had made sure of the count. Besides, it was barely possible that it was not he, after all, but another foreigner, with another daughter. The thought frightened me, but I drove it away. If it were really old Lira who had chosen this retreat in which to imprison his daughter and himself, I asked myself whether I could do anything save send word to Nino as soon as possible.

I felt like a sort of Don Quixote, suddenly chilled into the prosaic requirements of common sense. Perhaps if Hedwig had been my Dulcinea, instead of Nino's, the crazy fit would have lasted, and I would have attempted to scale the castle wall and carry off the prize by force. There is no telling what a sober old professor of philosophy may not do when he is crazy. But meanwhile I was sane. Graf von Lira had a right to live anywhere he pleased with his daughter, and the fact that I had discovered the spot where he pleased to live did not constitute an introduction. Or finally, if I got access to

the old count, what had I to say to him? Ought I to make a formal request for Nino? I looked at my old clothes and almost smiled.

But the weather was cold, though the roads were dusty; so I mounted my ass and jogged along, meditating deeply.

CHAPTER III.

FILLETTINO is a trifle cleaner than most towns of the same kind. Perhaps it rains more often, and there are fewer people. Considering that its vicinity has been the scene of robbery, murder, and all manner of adventurous crime from time immemorial, I had expected to find it a villainous place. It is nothing of the kind. There is a decent appearance about it that is surprising; and though the houses are old and brown and poor, I did not see pigs in many rooms, nor did the little children beg of me, as they beg of every one elsewhere. The absence of the pigs struck me particularly, for in the Sabine towns they live in common with the family, and go out only in the daytime to pick up what they can get.

I went to the apothecary—there is always an

apothecary in these places—and inquired for a lodging. Before very long I had secured a room, and it seemed that the people were accustomed to travellers, for it was surprisingly clean. The bed was so high that I could touch the ceiling when I sat on it, and the walls were covered with ornaments, such as glazed earthenware saints, each with a little basin for holy water, some old engravings of other saints, a few paper roses from the last fair, and a weather-beaten game-pouch of leather. The window looked out over a kind of square, where a great quantity of water ran into a row of masonry tanks out of a number of iron pipes projecting from an overhanging rock. Above the rock was the castle, the place I had come to see, towering up against the darkening sky.

It is such a strange place that I ought to describe it to you, or you will not understand the things that happened there. There is a great rock, as I said, rising above the town, and upon this is built the feudal stronghold, so that the walls of the building do not begin less than forty feet from the street level. The height of

the whole castle consequently seems enormous. The walls, for the most part, follow the lines of the gray rock, irregularly, as chance would have it, and the result is a three-cornered pile, having a high square tower at one angle, where also the building recedes some yards from the edge of the cliff, leaving on that side a broad terrace guarded by a stone parapet. On another side of the great isolated boulder a narrow roadway heads up a steep incline, impracticable for carriages, but passable for four-footed beasts; and this path gives access to the castle through a heavy gate opening upon a small court within. But the rock itself has been turned to account, and there are chambers within it which formerly served as prisons, opening to the right and left of a narrow staircase, hewn out of the stone, and leading from the foot of the tower to the street below; upon which it opens through a low square door, set in the rock and studded with heavy iron nails.

Below the castle hangs the town, and behind it rises the valley, thickly wooded with giant beech-trees. Of course I learned the details of

the interior little by little, and I gathered also some interesting facts regarding the history of Fillettino, which are not in any way necessary to my story. The first thing I did was to find out what means of communication there were with Rome. There was a postal service twice a week, and I was told that Count von Lira, whose name was no secret in the village, sent messengers very often to Subiaco. The post left that very day, and I wrote to Nino to tell him that I had found his friends in villeggiatura at Fillettino, advising him to come as soon as he could, and recruit his health and his spirits.

I learned, further, from the woman who rented me my lodging, that there were other people in the castle besides the count and his daughter. At least, she had seen a tall gentleman on the terrace with them during the last two days; and it was not true that the count kept Hedwig a prisoner. On the contrary, they rode out together almost every day, and yesterday the tall gentleman had gone with them. The woman also went into many details; telling me how much money the count had spent in a fortnight, bring-

ing furniture and a real piano and immense loads of baskets, which the porters were told contained glass and crockery, and must be carefully handled. It was clear that the count was settled for some time. He had probably taken the old place for a year, by a lease from the Roman family to whom Fillettino and the neighbouring estates belong. He would spend the spring and the summer there, at least.

Being anxious to see who the tall gentleman might be, of whom my landlady had spoken, I posted myself in the street, at the foot of the inclined bridle-path leading to the castle gate. I walked up and down for two hours, about the time I supposed they would all ride, hoping to catch a glimpse of the party. Neither the count nor his daughter knew me by sight, I was sure, and I felt quite safe. It was a long time to wait, but at last they appeared, and I confess that I nearly fell down against the wall when I saw them.

There they were on their horses, moving cautiously down the narrow way above me. First came the count, sitting in his saddle as though he were at the head of his old regiment, his great gray

moustaches standing out fiercely from his severe, wooden face. Then came Hedwig, whom I had not seen for a long time, looking as white and sorrowful as the angel of death, in a close black dress, or habit, so that her golden hair was all the colour there was to be seen about her.

But the third rider,—there was no mistaking that thin, erect figure, dressed in the affectation of youth; those fresh pink cheeks, with the snowy moustache, and the thick white hair showing beneath the jaunty hat; the eagle nose and the bright eyes. Baron Benoni, and no other.

My first instinct was to hide myself; but before I could retreat Benoni recognised me, even with my old clothes. Perhaps they are not so much older than the others, compared with his fashionable garments. He made no sign as the three rode by; only I could see by his eyes, that were fixed angrily upon me, that he knew me, and did not wish to show it. As for myself I stood stock still in amazement.

I had supposed that Benoni had really gone to Austria, as he had told me he was about to do. I had thought him ignorant of the count's retreat,

save for the hint which had so luckily led me straight to the mark. I had imagined him to be but a chance acquaintance of the Lira family, having little or no personal interest in their doings. Nevertheless, I had suspected him, as I have told you. Everything pointed to a deception on his part. He had evidently gone immediately from Rome to Fillettino. He must be intimate with the count, or the latter would not have invited him to share a retreat seemingly intended to be kept a secret. He also, I thought, must have some very strong reason for consenting to bury himself in the mountains in company with a father and daughter who could hardly be supposed to be on good terms with each other.

But again, why had he seemed so ready to help me and to forward Nino's suit? Why had he given me the smallest clue to the count's whereabouts? Now I am not a strong man in action, but I am a very cunning reasoner. I remembered the man, and the outrageous opinions he had expressed, both to Nino and to me. Then I understood my suspicions. It would be folly to expect such a man to have any real sympathy

or sense of friendship for any one. He had amused himself by promising to come back and go with me on my search, perhaps to make a laughing-stock of me, or even of my boy, by telling the story to the Liras afterwards. He had entertained no idea that I would go alone, or that, if I went, I could be successful. He had made a mistake, and was very angry; his eyes told me that. Then I made a bold resolution. I would see him and ask him what he intended to do; in short, why he had deceived me.

There would probably be no difficulty in the way of obtaining an interview. I was not known to the others of the party, and Benoni would scarcely refuse to receive me. I thought he would excuse himself, with ready cynicism, and pretend to continue his offers of friendship and assistance. I confess I regretted that I was so humbly clad, in all my old clothes; but after all, I was travelling, you know.

It was a bold resolution, I think, and I revolved the situation in my mind during two days, thinking over what I should say. But with all my thought I only found that everything

must depend on Benoni's answer to my own question—"Why?"

On the third day, I made myself look as fine as I could, and though my heart beat loudly as I mounted the bridle-path, I put on a bold look and rang the bell. It was a clanging thing, that seemed to creak on a hinge, as I pulled the stout string from outside. A man appeared, and on my inquiry said I might wait in the porch behind the great wooden gate, while he delivered my message to his excellency the baron. It seemed to take a long time, and I sat on a stone bench, eyeing the courtyard curiously from beneath the archway. It was sunny and clean, with an old well in the middle, but I could see nothing save a few windows opening upon it. At last the man returned and said that I might come with him.

I found Benoni, clad in a gorgeous dressing-gown, stalking up and down a large vaulted apartment, in which there were a few new arm-chairs, a table covered with books, and a quantity of ancient furniture that looked unsteady and fragile, although it had been carefully dusted. A plain green baize carpet covered about half the

floor, and the remainder was of red brick. The morning sun streamed in through tall windows, and played in a rainbow-like effulgence on the baron's many-coloured dressing-gown, as he paused in his walk to greet me.

"Well, my friend," said Benoni, gaily, "how in the name of the devil did you get here?" I thought I had been right; he was going to play at being my friend again.

"Very easily, by the help of your little hint," I replied, and I seated myself, for I felt that I was master of the situation.

"Ah, if I had suspected you of being so intelligent, I would not have given you any hint at all. You see I have not been to Austria on business, but am here in this good old flesh of mine, such as it is."

"Consequently——" I began, and then stopped. I suddenly felt that Benoni had turned the tables upon me, I could not tell how.

"Consequently," said he, continuing my sentence, "when I told you that I was going to Austria I was lying."

"The frankness of the statement obliges me to

believe that you are now telling the truth," I answered, angrily. I felt uneasy. Benoni laughed in his peculiar way.

"Precisely," he continued again, "I was lying. I generally do, for so long as I am believed I deceive people; and when they find me out, they are confused between truth and lying, so that they do not know what to believe at all. By the by, I am wandering. I am sorry to see you here. I hope you understand that." He looked at me with the most cheerful expression. I believe I was beginning to be angry at his insulting calmness. I did not answer him.

"Signor Grandi," he said in a moment, seeing I was silent, "I am enchanted to see you, if you prefer that I should be. But may I imagine if I can do anything more for you, now that you have heard from my own lips that I am a liar? I say it again,—I like the word,—I am a liar, and I wish I were a better one. What can I do for you?"

"Tell me why you have acted this comedy," said I, recollecting at the right moment the gist of my reflections during the past two days.

"Why? To please myself, good sir; for the sovereign pleasure of myself."

"I would surmise," I retorted, tartly, "that it could not have been for the pleasure of any one else."

"Perhaps you mean, because no one else could be base enough to take pleasure in what amuses me?" I nodded savagely at his question. "Very good. Knowing this of me, do you further surmise that I should be so simple as to tell you how I propose to amuse myself in the future?" I recognised the truth of this, and I saw myself checkmated at the outset. I therefore smiled, and endeavoured to seem completely satisfied, hoping that his vanity would betray him into some hint of the future. He seemed to have before taken pleasure in misleading me with a fragment of truth, supposing that I could not make use of it. I would endeavour to lead him into such a trap again.

"It is a beautiful country, is it not?" I remarked, going to the window before which he stood, and looking out. "You must enjoy it greatly, after the turmoil of society." You see,

I was once as gay as any of them, in the old days; and so I made the reflection that seemed natural to his case, wondering how he would answer.

"It is indeed a very passable landscape," he said, indifferently. "With horses and a charming companion one may kill a little time here, and find a satisfaction in killing it." I noticed the slip, by which he spoke of a single companion instead of two.

"Yes," I replied, "the count is said to be a most agreeable man."

He paused a moment, and the hesitation seemed to show that the count was not the companion he had in his mind.

"Oh, certainly," he said at length, "the count is very agreeable, and his daughter is the paragon of all the virtues and accomplishments." There was something a little disparaging in his tone as he made the last remark, which seemed to me a clumsy device to throw me off the scent, if scent there were. Considering his surpassing personal vanity, of which I had received an ocular demonstration when he visited me in Rome, I fancied that if there were nothing more

serious in his thoughts he would have given me to understand that Hedwig found him entirely irresistible. Since he was able to control his vanity, there must be a reason for it.

"I should think that the contessina must be charmed at having so brilliant a companion as yourself in her solitude," I said, feeling my way to the point.

"With me? I am an old man. Children of that age detest old men." I thought his manner constrained, and it was unlike him not to laugh as he made the speech. The conviction grew upon me that Hedwig was the object of his visit. Moreover, I became persuaded that he was but a poor sort of villain, for he was impulsive, as villains should never be. We leaned over the stone sill of the window, which he had opened during the conversation. There was a little trail of ants climbing up and down the wall at the side, and he watched them. One of the small creatures, heavily laden with a seed of some sort, and toiling painfully under the burden, had been separated from the rest, and clambered over the edge of the window-sill. On reaching

the level surface it paused, as though very weary, and looked about, moving its tiny horns. Benoni looked at it a moment, and then with one finger he suddenly whisked the poor little thing into space. It hurt me to see it, and I knew he must be cruel, for he laughed aloud. Somehow it would have seemed less cruel to have brushed away the whole trail of insects, rather than to pitch upon this one small tired workman, overladen and forgotten by the rest.

"Why did you do that?" I asked involuntarily.

"Why? Why do I do anything? Because I please, the best of all reasons."

"Of course; it was foolish of me to ask you. That is probably the cause of your presence here. You would like to hurl my boy Nino from the height he has reached in his love, and to satisfy your cruel instincts you have come here to attack the heart of an innocent girl." I watched him narrowly, and I have often wondered how I had the courage to insult him. It was a bold shot at the truth, and his look satisfied me that I was not very wide of the mark. To accuse a gray-haired old man of

attempting to win the affections of a young girl would seem absurd enough. But if you had ever seen Benoni, you would understand that he was anything but old, save for his snowy locks. Many a boy might envy the strange activity of his thin limbs, the bloom and freshness of his eager face, and the fire of his eyes. He was impulsive, too; for instead of laughing at the absurdity of the thing, or at what should have been its absurdity, as a more accomplished villain would have done, he was palpably angry. He looked quickly at me and moved savagely, so that I drew back, and it was not till some moments later that it occurred to him that he ought to seem amused.

"How ridiculous!" he cried at last, mastering his anger. "You are joking."

"Oh, of course I am joking," I answered, leaving the window. "And now I must wish you good-morning, with many apologies for my intrusion." He must have been glad to be rid of me, but he politely insisted on showing me to the gate. Perhaps he wanted to be sure that I should not ask questions of the servants.

As we passed through an outer hall we came suddenly upon Hedwig entering from the opposite direction, dressed in black, and looking like a beautiful shadow of pain. As I have told you, she did not know me. Benoni bowed to the ground as she went by, making some flattering speech about her appearance. She had started slightly on first seeing us, and then she went on without speaking; but there was on her face a look of such sovereign scorn and loathing as I never saw on the features of any living being. And more than scorn, for there was fear and hatred with it; so that if a glance could tell a whole history, there would have been no detail of her feeling for Benoni left to guess.

This meeting produced a profound impression on me, and I saw her face in my dreams that night. Had anything been wanting to complete, in my judgment, the plan of the situation in the castle, that something was now supplied. The Jew had come there to get her for himself. She hated him for his own sake; she hated him because she was faithful to Nino; she hated him because he perhaps knew of her secret love for

my boy. Poor maiden, shut up for days and weeks to come with a man she dreaded and scorned at once! The sight of her recalled to me that I had in my pocket the letter Nino had sent me for her, weeks before, and which I had found no means of delivering since I had been in Fillettino. Suddenly I was seized with a mad determination to deliver it at any cost. The baron bowed me out of the gate, and I paused outside when the ponderous door had swung on its hinges and his footsteps were echoing back through the court.

I sat down on the parapet of the bridle-path, and with my knife cut some of the stitches that sewed my money between my two waistcoats. I took out one of the bills of a hundred francs that were concealed within, I found the letter Nino had sent me for Hedwig, and I once more rang the bell. The man who had admitted me came again, and looked at me in some astonishment. But I gave him no time to question me.

"Here is a note for a hundred francs," I said. "Take it, and give this letter to the Signora Contessina. If you bring me a written answer

here to-morrow at this hour, I will give you as much more." The man was dumfounded for a moment, after which he clutched the money and the letter greedily, and hid them in his coat.

"Your excellency shall be punctually obeyed," he said, with a deep bow, and I went away.

It was recklessly extravagant of me to do this, but there was no other course. A small bribe would have been worse than none at all. If you can afford to pay largely, it is better to bribe a servant than to trust a friend. Your friend has nothing to gain by keeping your secret, whereas the servant hopes for more money in the future, and the prospect of profit makes him as silent as the grave.

I would certainly not have acted as I did had I not met Hedwig in the hall. But the sight of her pale face and heavy eyes went to my heart, and I would have given the whole of my little fortune to bring some gladness to her, even though I might not see it. The situation, too, was so novel and alarming that I felt obliged to act quickly, not knowing what evils delay might produce.

On the following morning I went up to the gateway again and rang the bell. The same man appeared. He slipped a note into my hand, and I slipped a bill into his. But, to my surprise, he did not shut the door and retire.

"The signorina said your excellency should read the note, and I should accompany you," he said; and I saw he had his hat in his hand, as if ready to go. I tore open the note. It merely said that the servant was trustworthy, and would "instruct the Signor Grandi" how to act.

"You told the contessina my name, then?" I said to the man. He had announced me to the baron, and consequently knew who I was. He nodded, closed the door behind him, and came with me. When we were in the street he explained that Hedwig desired to speak with me. He expounded the fact that there was a staircase in the rock, leading to the level of the town. Furthermore, he said that the old count and the baron occasionally drank deeply, as soldiers and adventurers will do, to pass the evening. The next time it occurred, he, the faithful servant, would

come to my lodging and conduct me into the castle by the aforesaid passage, of which he had the key.

I confess I was unpleasantly alarmed at the prospect of making a burglarious entrance in such romantic fashion. It savoured more of the last century than of the quiet and eminently respectable age in which we live. But then, the castle of Fillettino was built hundreds of years ago, and it is not my fault if it has not gone to ruin, like so many others of its kind. The man recommended me to be always at home after eight o'clock in the evening, in case I were wanted, and to avoid seeing the baron when he was abroad. He came and saw where I lived, and with many bows he left me.

You may imagine in what anxiety I passed my time. A whole week elapsed, and yet I was never summoned. Every evening at seven, an hour before the time named, I was in my room, waiting for some one who never came. I was so much disturbed in mind that I lost my appetite and thought of being bled again. But I thought it too soon, and con-

tented myself with getting a little tamarind from the apothecary. . .

One morning the apothecary, who is also the postmaster, gave me a letter from Nino, dated in Rome. His engagement was over, he had reached Rome, and he would join me immediately.

CHAPTER IV.

As it often happens that, in affairs of importance, the minor events which lead to the ultimate result seem to occur rapidly, and almost to stumble over each other in their haste, it came to pass that on the very evening after I had got Nino's letter I was sent for by the contessina.

When the man came to call me I was sitting in my room, from force of habit, though the long delay had made the possibility of the meeting seem shadowy. I was hoping that Nino might arrive in time to go in my place, for I knew that he would not be many hours behind his letter. He would assuredly travel as fast as he could, and if he had understood my directions he was not likely to go astray. But in spite of my hopes the summons came too soon, and I was obliged to go myself.

Picture to yourselves how I looked and how I felt: a sober old professor, as I am, stealing out in the night, all wrapped in a cloak as dark and shabby as any conspirator's; armed with a good knife in case of accidents; with beating heart, and doubting whether I could use my weapon if needful; and guided to the place of tryst by the confidential servant of a beautiful and unhappy maiden. I have often laughed since then at the figure I must have cut, but I did not laugh at the time. It was a very serious affair.''

We skirted the base of the huge rock on which the castle is built, and reached the small, low door without meeting any one. It was a moonlit night,—the Paschal moon was nearly at the full,—and the whiteness made each separate iron rivet in the door stand out distinct, thrown into relief by its own small shadow on the seamed oak. My guide produced a ponderous key, which screamed hoarsely in the lock under the pressure of his two hands, as he made it turn in the rusty wards. The noise frightened me, but the man laughed, and said they could not hear where they

sat, far up in the vaulted chamber, telling long stories over their wine. We entered, and I had to mount a little way up the dark steps to give him room to close the door behind us, by which we were left in total darkness. I confess I was very nervous and frightened until he lighted a taper which he had brought and made enough light to show the way. The stairs were winding and steep, but perfectly dry, and when he had passed me I followed him, feeling that at all events the door behind was closed, and there was some one between me and any danger ahead.

The man paused in front of me, and when I had rounded the corner of the winding steps I saw that a brighter light than ours shone from a small doorway opening directly upon the stair. In another moment I was in the presence of Hedwig von Lira. The man retired and left us.

She stood, dressed in black, against the rough stone; the strong light of a gorgeous gilt lamp that was placed on the floor streamed upward on her white face. Her eyes caught the brightness, and seemed to burn like deep, dark gems, though they appeared so blue in the day. She looked

like a person tortured past endurance, so that the pain of the soul has taken shape, and the agony of the heart has assumed substance. Tears shed had hollowed the marble cheeks, and the stronger suffering that cannot weep had chiselled out great shadows beneath her brows. Her thin clasped hands seemed wringing each other into strange shapes of woe; and though she stood erect as a slender pillar against the black rock, it was rather from the courage of despair than because she was straight and tall by her own nature.

I bent low before her, awed by the extremity of suffering I saw.

"Are you Signor Grandi?" she asked, in a low and trembling voice.

"Most humbly at your service, Signora Contessina," I answered. She put out her hand to me, and then drew it back quickly, with a timid nervous look as I moved to take it.

"I never saw you," she said, "but I feel as though you *must* be a friend——" She paused.

"Indeed, signorina, I am here for that reason," said I, trying to speak stoutly, and so to inspire

her with some courage. "Tell me how I can best serve you; and though I am not young and strong like Nino Cardegna, my boy, I am not so old but that I can do whatsoever you command."

"Then, in God's name, save me from this——" But again the sentence died upon her lips, and she glanced anxiously at the door. I reflected that if any one came we should be caught like mice in a trap, and I made as though I would look out upon the stairs. But she stopped me.

"I am foolishly frightened," she said. "That man is faithful, and will keep watch." I thought it time to discover her wishes.

"Signorina," said I, "you ask me to save you. You do not say from what. I can at least tell you that Nino Cardegna will be here in a day or two——" At this sudden news she gave a little cry, and the blood rushed to her cheeks, in strange contrast with their deathly whiteness. She seemed on the point of speaking, but checked herself, and her eyes, that had looked me through and through a moment before, drooped modestly under my glance.

"Is it possible?" she said at last, in a changed

voice. "Yes, if he comes, I think the Signor Cardegna will help me."

"Madam," I said, very courteously, for I guessed her embarrassment, "I can assure you that my boy is ready to give you his life in return for the kindness he received at your hands in Rome." She looked up, smiling through her tears, for the sudden happiness had moistened the drooping lids.

"You are very kind, Signor Grandi. Signor Cardegna is, I believe, a good friend of mine. You say he will be here?"

"I received a letter from him to-day, dated in Rome, in which he tells me that he will start immediately. He may be here to-morrow morning," I answered. Hedwig had regained her composure, perhaps because she was reassured by my manner of speaking about Nino. I, however, was anxious to hear from her own lips some confirmation of my suspicions concerning the baron. "I have no doubt," I continued presently, "that, with your consent, my boy will be able to deliver you from this prison——" I used the word at a venture. Had Hedwig suffered less,

and been less cruelly tormented, she would have rebuked me for the expression. But I recalled her to her position, and her self-control gave way at once.

"Oh, you are right to call it a prison!" she cried. "It is as much a prison as this chamber hewed out of the rock, where so many a wretch has languished hopelessly; a prison from which I am daily taken out into the sweet sun, to breathe and be kept alive, and to taste how joyful a thing liberty must be! And every day I am brought back, and told that I may be free if I will consent. Consent! God of mercy!" she moaned, in a sudden tempest of passionate despair. "Consent ever to belong, body—and soul—to be touched, polluted, desecrated, by that inhuman monster; sold to him, to a creature without pity, whose heart is a toad, a venomous creeping thing —sold to him for this life, and to the vengeance of God hereafter; bartered, traded, and told that I am so vile and lost that the very price I am offered is an honour to me, being so much more than my value." She came toward me as she spoke, and the passionate, unshed tears that

were in her seemed to choke her, so that her voice was hoarse.

"And for what—for what?" she cried, wildly, seizing my arm and looking fiercely into my eyes. "For what, I say? Because I gave him a poor rose; because I let him see me once; because I loved his sweet voice; because—because—I love him, and will love him, and do love him, though I die!"

The girl was in a frenzy of passion and love and hate all together, and did not count her words. The white heat of her tormented soul blazed from her pale face and illuminated every feature, though she was turned from the light, and she shook my arm in her grasp so that it pained me. The marble was burned in the fire, and must consume itself to ashes. The white and calm statue was become a pillar of flame in the life-and-death struggle for love. I strove to speak, but could not, for fear and wonder tied my tongue. And indeed she gave me short time to think.

"I tell you I love him, as he loves me," she continued, her voice trembling upon the rising

cadence, "with all my whole being. Tell him so. Tell him he must save me, and that only he can: that for his sake I am tortured, and scorned, and disgraced, and sold; my body thrown to dogs, and worse than dogs; my soul given over to devils that tempt me to kill and be free,—by my own father, for his sake. Tell him that these hands he kissed are wasted with wringing small pains from each other, but the greater pain drives them to do worse. Tell him, good sir,—you are kind and love him, but not as I do,—tell him that this golden hair of mine has streaks of white in these terrible two months; that these eyes he loved are worn with weeping. Tell him——"

But her voice failed her, and she staggered against the wall, hiding her face in her hands. A trembling breath, a struggle, a great wild sob: the long-sealed tears were free, and flowed fast over her hands.

"Oh, no, no," she moaned, "you must not tell him that." Then choking down her agony she turned to me: "You will not—you cannot tell him of this? I am weak, ill, but I will bear

everything for—for him." The great effort exhausted her, and I think that if I had not caught her she would have fallen, and she would have hurt herself very much on the stone floor. But she is young, and I am not very strong, and could not have held her up. So I knelt, letting her weight come on my shoulder.

The fair head rested pathetically against my old coat, and I tried to wipe away her tears with her long golden hair; for I had not any handkerchief. But very soon I could not see to do it. I was crying myself, for the pity of it all, and my tears trickled down and fell on her thin hands. And so I kneeled, and she half lay and half sat upon the floor, with her head resting on my shoulder, I was glad then to be old, for I felt that I had a right to comfort her.

Presently she looked up into my face, and saw that I was weeping. She did not speak, but found her little lace handkerchief, and pressed it to my eyes,—first to one, and then to the other; and the action brought a faint maidenly flush to her cheeks through all her own sorrow. A daughter could not have done it more kindly.

"My child," I said at last, "be sure that your secret is safe in me. But there is one coming with whom it will be safer."

"You are so good," she said, and her head sank once more, and nestled against my breast, so that I could just see the bright tresses through my gray beard. But in a moment she looked up again, and made as though she would rise; and then I helped her, and we both stood on our feet.

Poor, beautiful, tormented Hedwig! I can remember it, and call up the whole picture to my mind. She still leaned on my arm, and looked up to me, her loosened hair all falling back upon her shoulders; and the wonderful lines of her delicate face seemed made ethereal and angelic by her sufferings.

"My dear," I said at last, smoothing her golden hair with my hand, as I thought her mother would do, if she had a mother,—"my dear, your interview with my boy may be a short one, and you may not have an opportunity to meet at all for days. If it does not pain you too much, will you tell me just what your troubles are here? I can then tell him, so that you can

save time when you are together." She gazed into my eyes for some seconds, as though to prove me, whether I were a true man.

"I think you are right," she answered, taking courage. "I will tell you in two words. My father treats me as though I had committed some unpardonable crime, which I do not at all understand. He says my reputation is ruined. Surely that is not true?" She asked the question so innocently and simply that I smiled.

"No, my dear, it is not true," I replied.

"I am sure I cannot understand it," she continued; "but he says so, and insists that my only course is to accept what he calls the advantageous offer which has suddenly presented itself. He insists very roughly." She shuddered slightly. "He gives me no peace. It appears that this creature wrote to ask my father for my hand when we left Rome, two months ago. The letter was forwarded, and my father began at once to tell me that I must make up my mind to the marriage. At first I used to be very angry; but seeing we were alone, I finally determined to seem indifferent, and not to answer him when he

talked about it. Then he thought my spirit was broken, and he sent for Baron Benoni, who arrived a fortnight ago. Do you know him, Signor Grandi? You came to see him, so I suppose you do." The same look of hatred and loathing came to her face that I had noticed when Benoni and I met her in the hall.

"Yes, I know him. He is a traitor, a villain," I said earnestly.

"Yes, and more than that. But he is a great banker in Russia——"

"A banker?" I asked, in some astonishment.

"Did you not know it? Yes; he is very rich, and has a great firm, if that is the name for it. But he wanders incessantly, and his partners take care of his affairs. My father says that I shall marry him or end my days here."

"Unless you end his for him!" I cried, indignantly.

"Hush!" said she, and trembled violently. "He is my father, you know," she added, with sudden earnestness.

"But you cannot consent——" I began.

"Consent!" she interrupted, with a bitter laugh. "I will die rather than consent."

"I mean, you cannot consent to be shut up in this valley for ever."

"If need be, I will," she said, in a low voice.

"There is no need," I whispered.

"You do not know my father. He is a man of iron," she answered, sorrowfully.

"You do not know my boy. He is a man of his word," I replied.

We were both silent, for we both knew very well what our words meant. From such a situation there could be but one escape.

"I think you ought to go now," she said, at last. "If I were missed it would all be over. But I am sorry to let you go, you are so kind. How can you let me know——" She stopped, with a blush, and stooped to raise the lamp from the floor.

"Can you not meet here to-morrow night, when they are asleep?" I suggested, knowing what her question would have been.

"I will send the same man to you to-morrow evening, and let you know what is possible," she

said. "And now I will show you the way out of my house," she added, with the first faint shadow of a smile. With the slight gilt lamp in her hand she went out of the little rock chamber, listened a moment, and began to descend the steps.

"But the key?" I asked, following her light footsteps with my heavier tread.

"It is in the door," she answered, and went on.

When we reached the bottom, we found it as she had said. The servant had left the key on the inside, and with some difficulty I turned the bolts. We stood for one moment in the narrow space, where the lowest step was set close against the door. Her eyes flashed strangely in the lamplight.

"How easy it would be!" I said, understanding her glance. She nodded, and pushed me gently out into the street; and I closed the door, and leaned against it as she locked it.

"Good-night," she said from the other side, and I put my mouth to the key-hole. "Good-night. Courage!" I answered. I could hear her lightly mounting the stone steps. It seemed

wonderful to me that she should not be afraid to go back alone. But love makes people brave.

The moon had risen higher during the time I had been within, and I strolled round the base of the rock, lighting a cigar as I went. The terrible adventure I had dreaded was now over, and I felt myself again. In truth, it was a curious thing to happen to a man of my years and my habits; but the things I had heard had so much absorbed my attention that, while the interview lasted, I had forgotten the strange manner of the meeting. I was horrified at the extent of the girl's misery, more felt than understood from her brief description and passionate outbreaks. There is no mistaking the strength of a suffering that wastes and consumes the mortal part of us as wax melts at the fire.

And Benoni—the villain! He had written to ask Hedwig in marriage before he came to see me in Rome. There was something fiendish in his almost inviting me to see his triumph, and I cursed him as I kicked the loose stones in the road with my heavy shoes. So he was a banker,

as well as a musician and a wanderer. Who would have thought it?

"One thing is clear," I said to myself, as I went to bed: "unless something is done immediately, that poor girl will consume herself and die." And all that night her poor thin face and staring eyes were in my dreams; so that I woke up several times, thinking I was trying to comfort her, and could not. But toward dawn I felt sure that Nino was coming, and that all would be well.

I was chatting with my old landlady the next morning, and smoking to pass the time, when there was suddenly a commotion in the street. That is to say, some one was arriving, and all the little children turned out in a body to run after the stranger, while the old women came to their doors with their knitting, and squinted under the bright sunlight to see what was the matter.

It was Nino, of course—my own boy, riding on a stout mule, with a countryman by his side upon another. He was dressed in plain gray clothes, and wore high boots. His great felt hat drooped half across his face, and hid his eyes

from me; but there was no mistaking the stern square jaw and the close even lips. I ran toward him and called him by name. In a moment he was off his beast, and we embraced tenderly.

"Have you seen her?" were the first words he spoke. I nodded, and hurried him into the house where I lived, fearful lest some mischance should bring the party from the castle riding by. He sent his man with the mules to the inn, and when we were at last alone together he threw himself into a chair, and took off his hat.

Nino too was changed in the two months that had passed. He had travelled far, had sung lustily, and had been applauded to the skies; and he had seen the great world. But there was more than all that in his face. There were lines of care and of thought that well became his masculine features. There was a something in his look that told of a set purpose, and there was a light in his dark eyes that spoke a world of warning to any one who might dare to thwart him. But he seemed thinner, and his cheeks were as white as the paper I write on.

Some men are born masters, and never once relax the authority they exercise on those around them. Nino has always commanded me, as he seems to command everybody else, in the fewest words possible. But he is so true and honest and brave that all who know him love him; and that is more than can be said for most artists. As he sat in his chair, hesitating what question to ask first, or waiting for me to speak, I thought that if Hedwig von Lira had searched the whole world for a man able to deliver her from her cruel father and from her hated lover she could have chosen no better champion than Nino Cardegna, the singer. Of course you all say that I am infatuated with the boy, and that I helped him to do a reckless thing, simply because I was blinded by my fondness. But I maintain, and shall ever hold, that Nino did right in this matter, and I am telling my story merely in order that honest men may judge.

He sat by the window, and the sun poured through the panes upon his curling hair, his travelling dress, and his dusty boots. The woman of the house brought in some wine and

water; but he only sipped the water, and would not touch the wine.

"You are a dear kind father to me," he said, putting out his hand from where he sat, "and before we talk I must tell you how much I thank you." Simple words, as they look on paper; but another man could not have said so much in an hour as his voice and look told me.

CHAPTER V.

"NINO mio," I began, "I saw the contessina last night. She is in a very dramatic and desperate situation. But she greets you, and looks to you to save her from her troubles." Nino's face was calm, but his voice trembled a little as he answered:

"Tell me quickly, please, what the troubles are."

"Softly—I will tell you all about it. You must know that your friend Benoni is a traitor to you, and is here. Do not look astonished. He has made up his mind to marry the contessina, and she says she will die rather than take him, which is quite right of her." At the latter piece of news Nino sprang from his chair.

"You do not seriously mean that her father is trying to make her marry Benoni?" he cried.

"It is infamous, my dear boy; but it is true."

"Infamous! I should think you could find a stronger word. How did you learn this?" I detailed the circumstances of our meeting on the previous night. While I talked Nino listened with intense interest, and his face changed its look from anger to pity, and from pity to horror. When I had finished, he was silent.

"You can see for yourself," I said, "that the case is urgent."

"I will take her away," said Nino, at last. "It will be very unpleasant for the count. He would have been wiser to allow her to have her own way."

"Do nothing rash, Nino mio. Consider a little what the consequences would be if you were caught in the act of violently carrying off the daughter of a man as powerful as Von Lira."

"Bah! You talk of his power as though we lived under the Colonnesi and the Orsini, instead of under a free monarchy. If I am once married to her, what have I to fear? Do you think the count would go to law about his daughter's

reputation? Or do you suppose he would try to murder me?"

"I would do both, in his place," I answered. "But perhaps you are right, and he will yield when he sees that he is outwitted. Think again, and suppose that the contessina herself objects to such a step."

"That is a different matter. She shall do nothing save by her own free will. You do not imagine I would try to take her away unless she were willing?" He sat down again beside me, and affectionately laid one hand on my shoulder.

"Women, Nino, are women," I remarked.

"Unless they are angels," he assented.

"Keep the angels for Paradise, and beware of taking them into consideration in this working-day world. I have often told you, my boy, that I am older than you."

"As if I doubted that!" he laughed.

"Very well. I know something about women. A hundred women will tell you that they are ready to flee with you; but not more than one in the hundred will really leave everything and follow you to the end of the world when the

moment comes for running away. They always make a fuss at the last, and say it is too dangerous, and you may be caught. That is the way of them. You will be quite ready with a ladder of ropes, like one of Boccaccio's men, and a roll of banknotes for the journey, and smelling-salts, and a cushion for the puppy dog, and a separate conveyance for the maid, just according to the directions she has given you; then, at the very last, she will perhaps say that she is afraid of hurting her father's feelings by leaving him without any warning. Be careful, Nino!"

"As for that," he answered, sullenly enough, "if she will not, she will not; and I would not attempt to persuade her against her inclination. But unless you have very much exaggerated what you saw in her face, she will be ready at five minutes' notice. It must be very like hell, up there in that castle, I should think."

"Messer Diavolo, who rules over the house, will not let his prey escape him so easily as you think."

"Her father?" he asked.

"No; Benoni. There is no creature so re-

lentless as an old man in pursuit of a young woman."

"I am not afraid of Benoni."

"You need not be afraid of her father," said I, laughing. "He is lame, and cannot run after you." I do not know why it is that we Romans laugh at lame people; we are sorry for them, of course, as we are for other cripples.

"There is something more than fear in the matter," said Nino, seriously. "It is a great thing to have upon one's soul."

"What?" I asked.

"To take a daughter away from her father without his consent,—or at least without consulting him. I would not like to do it."

"Do you mean to ask the old gentleman's consent before eloping with his daughter? You are a little donkey, Nino, upon my word."

"Donkey, or anything else you like, but I will act like a galantuomo. I will see the count, and ask him once more whether he is willing to let his daughter marry me. If not, so much the worse; he will be warned."

"Look here, Nino," I said, astonished at the

idea. "I have taught you a little logic. Suppose you meant to steal a horse instead of a woman. Would you go to the owner of the horse, with your hat in your hand, and say, 'I trust your worship will not be offended if I steal this horse, which seems to be a good animal and pleases me;' and then would you expect him to allow you to steal his horse?"

"Sor Cornelio, the case is not the same. Women have a right to be free, and to marry whom they please; but horses are slaves. However, as I am not a thief, I would certainly ask the man for the horse; and if he refused it, and I conceived that I had a right to have it, I would take it by force and not by stealth."

"It appears to me that if you meant to get possession of what was not yours you might as well get it in the easiest possible way," I objected. "But we need not argue the case. There is a much better reason why you should not consult the count."

"I do not believe it," said Nino, stubbornly.

"Nevertheless, it is so. The Contessina di Lira is desperately unhappy, and if nothing is

done she may die. Young women have died of broken hearts before now. You have no right to endanger her life by risking failure. Answer me that, if you can, and I will grant you are a cunning sophist, but not a good lover."

"There is reason in what you say now," he answered. "I had not thought of that desperateness of the case which you speak of. You have seen her." He buried his face in his hand, and seemed to be thinking.

"Yes, I have seen her, and I wish you had been in my place. You would think differently about asking her father's leave to rescue her." From having been anxious to prevent anything rash, it seemed that I was now urging him into the very jaws of danger. I think that Hedwig's face was before me, as it had been in reality on the previous evening. "As Curione said to Cæsar, delay is injurious to any one who is fully prepared for action. I remember also to have read somewhere that such waste of time in diplomacy and palavering is the favourite resource of feeble and timid minds, who regard the use of dilatory and ambiguous measures as an

evidence of the most admirable and consummate prudence."

"Oh, you need not use so much learning with me," said Nino. "I assure you that I will be neither dilatory nor ambiguous. In fact, I will go at once, without even dusting my boots, and I will say, Give me your daughter, if you can; and if you cannot, I will still hope to marry her. He will probably say 'No,' and then I will carry her off. It appears to me that is simple enough."

"Take my advice, Nino. Carry her off first, and ask permission afterwards. It is much better. The real master up there is Benoni, I fancy, and not the count. Benoni is a gentleman who will give you much trouble. If you go now to see Hedwig's father, Benoni will be present at the interview." Nino was silent, and sat stretching his legs before him, his head on his breast. "Benoni," I continued, "has made up his mind to succeed. He has probably taken this fancy into his head out of pure wickedness. Perhaps he is bored, and really wants a wife. But I believe he is a man who delights in cruelty and would as lief break the contessina's

heart by getting rid of you as by marrying her." I saw that he was not listening.

"I have an idea," he said at last. "You are not very wise, Messer Cornelio, and you counsel me to be prudent and to be rash in the same breath."

"You make very pretty compliments, Sor Nino," I answered, tartly. He put out his hand deprecatingly.

"You are as wise as any man can be who is not in love," he said, looking at me with his great eyes. "But love is the best counsellor."

"What is your idea?" I asked, somewhat pacified.

"You say they ride together every day. Yes —very good. The contessina will not ride to-day, partly because she will be worn out with fatigue from last night's interview, and partly because she will make an effort to discover whether I have arrived to-day or not. You can count on that."

"I imagine so."

"Very well," he continued; "in that case, one of two things will happen: either the count will go out alone, or they will all stay at home."

"Why will Benoni not go out with the count?"

"Because Benoni will hope to see Hedwig alone if he stays at home, and the count will be very glad to give him the opportunity."

"I think you are right, Nino. You are not so stupid as I thought."

"In war," continued the boy, "a general gains a great advantage by separating his adversary's forces. If the count goes out alone, I will present myself to him in the road, and tell him what I want."

"Now you are foolish again. You should, on the contrary, enter the house when the count is away, and take the signorina with you then and there. Before he could return you would be miles on the road to Rome."

"In the first place, I tell you once and for all, Sor Cornelio," he said, slowly, "that such an action would be dishonourable, and I will not do anything of the kind. Moreover, you forget that, if I followed your advice, I should find Benoni at home,—the very man from whom you think I have everything to fear. No; I must give the count one fair chance." I was silent, for I saw

he was determined, and yet I would not let him think I was satisfied.

The idea of losing an advantage by giving an enemy any sort of warning before the attack seemed to me novel in the extreme; but I comprehended that Nino saw in his scheme a satisfaction to his conscience, and smelled in it a musty odour of forgotten knight-errantry that he had probably learned to love in his theatrical experiences. I had certainly not expected that Nino Cardegna, the peasant child, would turn out to be the pink of chivalry and the mirror of honour. But I could not help admiring his courage, and wondering if it would not play him false at the perilous moment. I did not half know him then, though he had been with me for so many years. But I was very anxious to ascertain from him what he meant to do, for I feared that his bold action would make trouble, and I had visions of the count and Benoni together taking sudden and summary vengeance on myself.

"Nino," I said, "I have made great sacrifices to help you in finding these people,"—I would not tell him I had sold my vineyard to make

preparations for a longer journey, though he has since found it out,—"but if you are going to do anything rash I will get on my little ass and ride a few miles from the village until it is over." Nino laughed aloud.

"My dear professor," he said, "do not be afraid. I will give you plenty of time to get out of the way. Meanwhile, the contessina is certain to send the confidential servant of whom you speak to give me instructions. If I am not here, you ought to be, in order to receive the message. Now listen to me."

I prepared to be attentive and to hear his scheme. I was by no means expecting the plan he proposed.

"The count may take it into his head to ride at a different hour, if he rides alone," he began. "I will therefore have my mule saddled now, and will station my man—a countryman from Subiaco and good for any devilry—in some place where he can watch the entrance to the house, or the castle, or whatever you call this place. So soon as he sees the count come out he will call me. As a man can ride in only one of two

directions in this valley, I shall have no trouble whatever in meeting the old gentleman, even if I cannot overtake him with my mule."

"Have you any arms, Nino?"

"No. I do not want weapons to face an old man in broad daylight; and he is too much of a soldier to attack me if I am defenceless. If the servant cömes after I am gone, you must remember every detail of what he says, and you must also arrange a little matter with him. Here is money, as much as will keep any Roman servant quiet. The man will be rich before we have done with him. I will write a letter which he must deliver; but he must also know what he has to do.

"At twelve o'clock to-night the contessina must positively be at the door of the staircase by which you entered yesterday. *Positively*—do you understand? She will then choose for herself between what she is suffering now and flight with me. If she chooses to fly, my mules and my countryman will be ready. The servant who admits me had better make the best of his way to Rome, with the money he has got. There will

be difficulties in the way of getting the contessina to the staircase, especially as the count will be in a towering passion with me, and will not sleep much. But he will not have the smallest idea that I shall act so suddenly, and he will fancy that when once his daughter is safe within the walls for the night she will not think of escaping. I do not believe he even knows of the existence of this staircase. At all events, it appears from your success in bribing the first man you met, that the servants are devoted to her interests and their own, and not at all to those of her father."

"I cannot conceive, Nino," said I, "why you do not put this bold plan into execution without seeing the count first, and making the whole thing so dangerous. If he takes alarm in the night, he will catch you fast enough on his good horses before you are at Trevi."

"I am determined to act as I propose," said Nino, "because it is a thousand times more honourable, and because I am certain that the contessina would not have me act otherwise. She will also see for herself that flight is best;

for I am sure the count will make a scene of some kind when he comes home from meeting me. If she knows she can escape to-night she will not suffer from what he has to say; but she will understand that without the prospect of freedom she would suffer very much."

"Where did you learn to understand women, my boy?" I asked.

"I do not understand women in general," he answered, "but I understand very well the only woman who exists for me personally. I know that she is the soul of honour, and that at the same time she has enough common sense to perceive the circumstances of her situation."

"But how will you make sure of not being overtaken?" I objected, making a last feeble stand against his plan.

"That is simple enough. My countryman from Subiaco knows every inch of these hills. He says that the pass above Fillettino is impracticable for any animals save men, mules, and donkeys. A horse would roll down at every turn. My mules are the best of their kind, and there are none like them here. By sunrise I shall be over the

Serra and well on the way to Ceprano, or whatever place I may choose for joining the railroad."

"And I? Will you leave me here to be murdered by that Prussian devil?" I asked, in some alarm.

"Why, no, padre mio. If you like, you can start for Rome at sunset, or as soon as I return from meeting the count; or you can get on your donkey and go up the pass, where we shall overtake you. Nobody will harm you, in your disguise, and your donkey is even more sure-footed than my mules. It will be a bright night, too, for the moon is full."

"Well, well, Nino," said I at last, "I suppose you will have your own way, as you always do in the world. And if it must be so, I will go up the pass alone, for I am not afraid at all. It would be against all the proprieties that you should be riding through a wild country alone at night with the young lady you intend to marry; and if I go with you there will be nothing to be said, for I am a very proper person, and hold a responsible position in Rome. But for charity's sake, do not undertake anything of this kind again——"

"Again?" exclaimed Nino, in surprise. "Do you expect me to spend my life in getting married,—not to say in eloping?"

"Well, I trust that you will have enough of it this time."

'I cannot conceive that when a man has once married the woman he loves he should ever look at another," said Nino, gravely.

"You are a most blessed fellow," I exclaimed.

Nino found my writing materials, which consisted of a bad steel pen, some coarse ruled paper, and a wretched little saucer of ink, and began writing an epistle to the contessina. I watched him as he wrote, and I smoked a little to pass the time. As I looked at him I came to the conclusion that to-day, at least, he was handsome. His thick hair curled about his head, and his white skin was as pale and clear as milk. I thought that his complexion had grown less dark than it used to be, perhaps from being so much in the theatre at night. That takes the dark blood out of the cheeks. But any woman would have looked twice at him. Besides, there was, as there is now, a certain marvellous neat-

ness and spotlessness about his dress; but for his dusty boots you would not have guessed he had been travelling. Poor Nino! When he had not a penny in the world but what he earned by copying music, he used to spend it all with the washerwoman, so that Mariuccia was often horrified, and I reproved him for the extravagance.

At last he finished writing, and put his letter into the only envelope there was left. He gave it to me, and said he would go out and order his mules to be ready.

"I may be gone all day," he said, "and I may return in a few hours. I cannot tell. In any case, wait for me, and give the letter and all the instructions to the man, if he comes." Then he thanked me once more very affectionately, and having embraced me he went out.

I watched from the window, and he looked up and waved his hand. I remember it very distinctly—just how he looked. His face was paler than ever, his lips were close set, though they smiled, and his eyes were sad. He is an incomprehensible boy—he always was.

I was left alone, with plenty of time for meditation, and I assure you my reflections were not pleasant. O love, love, what madness you drive us into, by day and night! Surely it is better to be a sober professor of philosophy than to be in love, ever so wildly, or sorrowfully, or happily. I do not wonder that a parcel of idiots have tried to prove that Dante loved philosophy and called it Beatrice. He would have been a sober professor, if that were true, and a happier man. But I am sure it is not true, for I was once in love myself.

CHAPTER VI.

It fell out as Nino had anticipated, and when he told me all the details, some time afterwards, it struck me that he had shown an uncommon degree of intelligence in predicting that the old count would ride alone that day. He had, indeed, so made his arrangements that even if the whole party had come out together nothing worse would have occurred than a postponement of the interview he sought. But he was destined to get what he wanted that very day, namely, an opportunity of speaking with Von Lira alone.

It was twelve o'clock when he left me, and the mid-day bell was ringing from the church, while the people bustled about, getting their food. Every old woman had a piece of corn cake, and the ragged children got what they could, gathering the crumbs in their mothers' aprons.

A few rough fellows who were not away at work in the valley munched the maize bread with a leek and a bit of salt fish, and some of them had oil on it. Our mountain people eat scarcely anything else, unless it be a little meat on holidays, or an egg when the hens are laying. But they laugh and chatter over the coarse fare, and drink a little wine when they can get it. Just now, however, was the season for fasting, being the end of Holy Week, and the people made a virtue of necessity, and kept their eggs and their wine for Easter.

When Nino went out he found his countryman, and explained to him what he was to do. The man saddled one of the mules and put himself on the watch, while Nino sat by the fire in the quaint old inn and ate some bread. It was the end of March when these things happened, and a little fire was grateful, though one could do very well without it. He spread his hands to the flame of the sticks, as he sat on the wooden settle by the old hearth, and he slowly gnawed his corn cake, as though a week before he had not been a great man in Paris, dining

sumptuously with famous people. He was not thinking of that. He was looking in the flame for a fair face that he saw continually before him, day and night. He expected to wait a long time, —some hours, perhaps.

Twenty minutes had not elapsed, however, before his man came breathless through the door, calling to him to come at once; for the solitary rider had gone out, as was expected, and at a pace that would soon take him out of sight. Nino threw his corn bread to a hungry dog that yelped as it hit him, and then fastened on it like a beast of prey.

In the twinkling of an eye he and his man were out of the inn. As they ran to the place where the mule was tied to an old ring in the crumbling wall of a half-ruined house near to the ascent to the castle, the man told Nino that the fine gentleman had ridden toward Trevi, down the valley. Nino mounted, and hastened in the same direction.

As he rode he reflected that it would be wiser to meet the count on his return, and pass him after the interview, as though going away from

Fillettino. It would be a little harder for the mule; but such an animal, used to bearing enormous burdens for twelve hours at a stretch, could well carry Nino only a few miles of good road before sunset, and yet be fresh again by midnight. One of those great sleek mules, if good-tempered, will tire three horses, and never feel the worse for it. He therefore let the beast go her own pace along the road to Trevi, winding by the brink of the rushing torrent: sometimes beneath great overhanging cliffs, sometimes through bits of cultivated land, where the valley widens; and now and then passing under some beech-trees, still naked and skeleton-like in the bright March air.

But Nino rode many miles, as he thought, without meeting the count, dangling his feet out of the stirrups, and humming snatches of song to himself to pass the time. He looked at his watch,—a beautiful gold one, given him by a very great personage in Paris,—and it was half past two o'clock. Then, to avoid tiring his mule, he got off and sat by a tree, at a place where he could see far along the road. But

three o'clock came, and a quarter past, and he began to fear that the count had gone all the way to Trevi. Indeed, Trevi could not be very far off, he thought. So he mounted again, and paced down the valley. He says that in all that time he never thought once of what he should say to the count when he met him, having determined in his mind once and for all what was to be asked; to which the only answer must be "yes" or "no."

At last, before he reached the turn in the valley, and just as the sun was passing down behind the high mountains on the left, beyond the stream, he saw the man he had come out to meet, not a hundred yards away, riding toward him on his great horse, at a foot pace. It was the count, and he seemed lost in thought, for his head was bent on his breast, and the reins hung carelessly loose from his hand. He did not raise his eyes until he was close to Nino, who took off his hat and pulled up short.

The old count was evidently very much surprised, for he suddenly straightened himself in his saddle, with a sort of jerk, and glared

savagely at Nino; his wooden features appearing to lose colour, and his long moustache standing out and bristling. He also reined in his horse, and the pair sat on their beasts, not five yards apart, eying each other like a pair of duelists. Nino was the first to speak, for he was prepared.

"Good day, Signor Conte," he said, as calmly as he could. "You have not forgotten me, I am sure." Lira looked more and more amazed as he observed the cool courtesy with which he was accosted. But his polite manner did not desert him even then, for he raised his hat.

"Good-day," he said, briefly, and made his horse move on. He was too proud to put the animal to a brisker pace than a walk, lest he should seem to avoid an enemy. But Nino turned his mule at the same time.

"Pardon the liberty, sir," he said, "but I would take advantage of this opportunity to have a few words with you."

"It is a liberty, as you say, sir," replied Lira, stiffly, and looking straight before him. "But since you have met me, say what you have to say quickly." He talked in the same curious

constructions as formerly, but I will spare you the grammatical vagaries.

"Some time has elapsed," continued Nino, "since our unfortunate encounter. I have been in Paris, where I have had more than common success in my profession. From being a very poor teacher of Italian to the signorina, your daughter, I am become an exceedingly prosperous artist. My character is blameless and free from all stain, in spite of the sad business in which we were both concerned, and of which you knew the truth from the dead lady's own lips."

"What then?" growled Lira, who had listened grimly, and was fast losing his temper. "What then? Do you suppose, Signor Cardegna, that I am still interested in your comings and goings?"

"The sequel to what I have told you, sir," answered Nino, bowing again, and looking very grave, "is that I once more most respectfully and honestly ask you to give me the hand of your daughter, the Signorina Hedwig von Lira."

The hot blood flushed the old soldier's hard features to the roots of his gray hair, and his voice trembled as he answered:

"Do you intend to insult me, sir? If so, this quiet road is a favourable spot for settling the question. It shall never be said that an officer in the service of his majesty the King and Emperor refused to fight with any one,—with his tailor, if need be." He reined his horse from Nino's side, and eyed him fiercely.

"Signor Conte," answered Nino, calmly, "nothing could be further from my thoughts than to insult you, or to treat you in any way with disrespect. And I will not acknowledge that anything you can say can convey an insult to myself." Lira smiled in a sardonic fashion. "But," added Nino, "if it would give you any pleasure to fight, and if you have weapons, I shall be happy to oblige you. It is a quiet spot, as you say, and it shall never be said that an Italian artist refused to fight a German soldier."

"I have two pistols in my holsters," said Lira, with a smile. "The roads are not safe, and I always carry them."

"Then, sir, be good enough to select one and to give me the other, and we will at once proceed to business."

The count's manner changed. He looked grave.

"I have the pistols, Signor Cardegna, but I do not desire to use them. Your readiness satisfies me that you are in earnest, and we will therefore not fight for amusement. I need not defend myself from any charge of unwillingness, I believe," he added, proudly.

"In that case, sir," said Nino, "and since we have convinced each other that we are serious and desire to be courteous, let us converse calmly."

"Have you anything more to say?" asked the count, once more allowing his horse to pace along the dusty road, while Nino's mule walked by his side.

"I have this to say, Signor Conte," answered Nino: "that I shall not desist from desiring the honour of marrying your daughter, if you refuse me a hundred times. I wish to put it to you whether, with youth, some talent,—I speak modestly,—and the prospect of a plentiful income, I am not as well qualified to aspire to the alliance as Baron Benoni, who has old age, much

talent, an enormous fortune, and the benefit of the Jewish faith into the bargain."

The count winced palpably at the mention of Benoni's religion. No people are more insanely prejudiced against the Hebrew race than the Germans. They indeed maintain that they have greater cause than others, but it always appears to me that they are unreasonable about it. . . Benoni chanced to be a Jew, but his peculiarities would have been the same had he been a Christian or an American. There is only one Ahasuerus Benoni in the world.

"There is no question of Baron Benoni here," said the count severely, but hurriedly. "Your observations are beside the mark. The objections to the alliance, as you call it, are that you are a man of the people,—I do not desire to offend you,—a plebeian, in fact; you are also a man of uncertain fortune, like all singers; and lastly, you are an artist. I trust you will consider these points as a sufficient reason for my declining the honour you propose."

"I will only say," returned Nino, "that I venture to consider your reasons insufficient,

though I do not question your decision. Baron Benoni was ennobled for a loan made to a government in difficulties; he was, by his own account, a shoemaker by early occupation, and a strolling musician—a great artist if you like—by the profession he adopted."

"I never heard these facts," said Lira, "and I suspect that you have been misinformed. But I do not wish to continue the discussion of the subject."

Nino says that after the incident of the pistols the interview passed without the slightest approach to ill-temper on either side. They both felt that if they disagreed they were prepared to settle their difficulties then and there, without any further ado.

"Then, sir, before we part, permit me to call your attention to a matter which must be of importance to you," said Nino. "I refer to the happiness of the Signorina di Lira. In spite of your refusal of my offer, you will understand that the welfare of that lady must always be to me of the greatest importance."

Lira bowed his head stiffly, and seemed

inclined to speak, but changed his mind, and held his tongue, to see what Nino would say.

"You will comprehend, I am sure," continued the latter, "that in the course of those months, during which I was so far honoured as to be of service to the contessina, I had opportunities of observing her remarkably gifted intelligence. I am now credibly informed that she is suffering from ill health. I have not seen her, nor made any attempt to see her, as you might have supposed, but I have an acquaintance in Fillettino who has seen her pass his door daily. Allow me to remark that a mind of such rare qualities must grow sick if driven to feed upon itself in solitude. I would respectfully suggest that some gayer residence than Fillettino would be a sovereign remedy for her illness."

"Your tone and manner," replied the count, "forbid my resenting your interference. I have no reason to doubt your affection for my daughter, but I must request you to abandon all idea of changing my designs. If I choose to bring my daughter to a true sense of her position by somewhat rigorous methods, it is because I am aware

that the frailty of reputation surpasses the frailty of woman. I will say this to your credit, sir, that if she has not disgraced herself, it has been in some measure because you wisely forbore from pressing your suit while you were received as an instructor beneath my roof. I am only doing my duty in trying to make her understand that her good name has been seriously exposed, and that the best reparation she can make lies in following my wishes, and accepting the honourable and advantageous marriage I have provided for her. I trust that this explanation, which I am happy to say has been conducted with the strictest propriety, will be final, and that you will at once desist from any further attempts toward persuading me to consent to a union that I disapprove."

Lira once more stopped his horse in the road, and taking off his hat bowed to Nino.

"And I, sir," said Nino, no less courteously, "am obliged to you for your clearly expressed answer. I shall never cease to regret your decision, and so long as I live I shall hope that you may change your mind. Good-day, Signor Conte," and he bowed to his saddle.

"Good-day, Signor Cardegna." So they parted: the count heading homeward toward Fillettino, and Nino turning back toward Trevi.

By this manœuvre he conveyed to the count's mind the impression that he had been to Fillettino for the day, and was returning to Trevi for the evening; and in reality the success of his enterprise, since his representations had failed, must depend upon Hedwig's being comparatively free during the ensuing night. He determined to wait by the roadside until it should be dark, allowing his mule to crop whatever poor grass she could find at this season, and thus giving the count time to reach Fillettino, even at the most leisurely pace.

He sat down upon the root of a tree, and allowed his mule to graze at liberty. It was already growing dark in the valley; for between the long speeches of civility the two had employed and the frequent pauses in the interview, the meeting had lasted the greater part of an hour.

Nino says that while he waited he reviewed his past life and his present situation.

Indeed, since he had made his first appearance in the theatre, three months before, events had crowded thick and fast in his life. The first sensation of a great public success is strange to one who has long been accustomed to live unnoticed and unhonoured by the world. It is at first incomprehensible that one should have suddenly grown to be an object of interest and curiosity to one's fellow-creatures, after having been so long a looker-on. At first a man does not realise that the thing he has laboured over, and studied, and worked on, can be actually anything remarkable. The production of the every-day task has long grown a habit, and the details which the artist grows to admire and love so earnestly have each brought with them their own reward. Every difficulty vanquished, every image of beauty embodied, every new facility of skill acquired, has been in itself a real and enduring satisfaction for its own sake, and for the sake of its fitness to the whole,—the beautiful perfect whole he has conceived.

But he must necessarily forget, if he loves his work, that those who come after, and are to see

the expression of his thought, or hear the mastery of his song, see or hear it all at once; so that the assemblage of the lesser beauties, over each of which the artist has had great joy, must produce a suddenly multiplied impression upon the understanding of the outside world, which sees first the embodiment of the thought, and has then the after-pleasure of appreciating the details. The hearer is thrilled with a sense of impassioned beauty, which the singer may perhaps feel when he first conceives the interpretation of the printed notes, but which goes ever farther from him as he strives to approach it and realise it; and so his admiration for his own song is lost in dissatisfaction with the failings which others have not time to see.

Before he is aware of the change, a singer has become famous, and all men are striving for a sight of him, or a hearing. There are few like Nino, whose head was not turned at all by the flattery and the praise, being occupied with other things. As he sat by the roadside, he thought of the many nights when the house rang with cheers and cries and all manner of applause; and

he remembered how, each time he looked his audience in the face, he had searched for the one face of all faces that he cared to see, and had searched in vain.

He seemed now to understand that it was his honest-hearted love for the fair northern girl that had protected him from caring for the outer world, and he now realised what the outer world was. He fancied to himself what his first three months of brilliant success might have been, in Rome and Paris, if he had not been bound by some strong tie of the heart to keep him serious and thoughtful. He thought of the women who had smiled upon him, and of the invitations that had besieged him, and of the consternation that had manifested itself when he declared his intention of retiring to Rome, after his brilliant engagement in Paris, without signing any further contract.

Then came the rapid journey, the excitement, the day in Rome, the difficulties of finding Fillettino; and at last he was here, sitting by the roadside, and waiting for it to be time to carry into execution the bold scheme he had set

before him. His conscience was at rest, for he now felt that he had done all that the most scrupulous honour could exact of him. He had returned in the midst of his success to make an honourable offer of marriage, and he had been refused,—because he was a plebeian, forsooth! And he knew also that the woman he loved was breaking her heart for him.

What wonder that he set his teeth, and said to himself that she should be his, at any price! Nino has no absurd ideas about the ridicule that attaches to loving a woman, and taking her if necessary. He has not been trained up in the heart of the wretched thing they call society, which ruined me long ago. What he wants he asks for, like a child, and if it is refused, and his good heart tells him that he has a right to it, he takes it, like a man, or like what a man was in the old time before the Englishman discovered that he is an ape. Ah, my learned colleagues, we are not so far removed from the ancestral monkey but that there is serious danger of our shortly returning to that primitive and caudal state! And I think that my boy and

the Prussian officer, as they sat on their beasts and bowed, and smiled, and offered to fight each other, or to shake hands, each desiring to oblige the other, like a couple of knights of the old ages, were a trifle further removed from our common gorilla parentage than some of us.

But it grew dark, and Nino caught his mule and rode slowly back to the town, wondering what would happen before the sun rose on the other side of the world. Now, lest you fail to understand wholly how the matter passed, I must tell you a little of what took place during the time that Nino was waiting for the count, and Hedwig was alone in the castle with Baron Benoni. The way I came to know is this: Hedwig told the whole story to Nino, and Nino told it to me; but many months after that eventful day, which I shall always consider as one of the most remarkable in my life. It was Good Friday, last year, and you may find out the day of the month for yourselves.

CHAPTER VII.

As Nino had guessed, the count was glad of a chance to leave his daughter alone with Benoni, and it was for this reason that he had ridden out so early. The baron's originality and extraordinary musical talent seemed to Lira gifts which a woman needed only to see in order to appreciate, and which might well make her forget his snowy locks. During the time of Benoni's visit the count had not yet been successful in throwing the pair together, for Hedwig's dislike for the baron made her exert her tact to the utmost in avoiding his society.

It so happened that Hedwig, rising early, and breathing the sweet, cool air from the window of her chamber, had seen Nino ride by on his mule, when he arrived in the morning. He did not see her, for the street merely passed the corner

of the great pile, and it was only by stretching her head far out that Hedwig could get a glimpse of it. But it amused her to watch the country people going by, with their mules and donkeys and hampers, or loads of firewood; and she would often lean over the window-sill for half an hour at a time gazing at the little stream of mountain life, and sometimes weaving small romances of the sturdy brown women and their active, dark-browed shepherd lovers. Moreover, she fully expected that Nino would arrive that day, and had some faint hope of seeing him go along the road. So she was rewarded, and the sight of the man she loved was the first breath of freedom.

In a great house like the strange abode Lira had selected for the seclusion of his daughter, it constantly occurs that one person is in ignorance of the doings of the others; and so it was natural that when Hedwig heard the clatter of hoofs in the courtyard, and the echoing crash of the great doors as they opened and closed, she should think both her father and Benoni had ridden away, and would be gone for the morning. She would not look out, lest she should see them and be seen.

I cannot tell you exactly what she felt when she saw Nino from her lofty window, but she was certainly glad with her whole heart. If she had not known of his coming from my visit the previous evening, she would perhaps have given way to some passionate outburst of happiness; but as it was, the feeling of anticipation, the sweet, false dawn of freedom, together with the fact that she was prepared, took from this first pleasure all that was overwhelming. She only felt that he had come, and that she would soon be saved from Benoni; she could not tell How, but she knew it, and smiled to herself for the first time in months, as she held a bit of jewelry to her slender throat, before the glass, wondering whether she had not grown too thin and pale to please her lover, who had been courted by the beauties of the world since he had left her.

She was ill, perhaps, and tired. That was why she looked pale; but she knew that the first day of freedom would make her as beautiful as ever. She spent the morning hours in her rooms; but when she heard the gates close, she fancied herself alone in the great house, and went down

into the sunny courtyard, to breathe the air, and to give certain instructions to her faithful man. She sent him to my house to speak with me; and that was all the message he had, for the present. However, he knew well enough what he was to do. There was a strong smell of bank-notes in the air, and the man kept his nose up.

Having despatched this important business, Hedwig set herself to walk up and down the paved quadrangle, on the sunny side. There was a stone bench in a warm corner that looked inviting. She entered the house and brought out a book, with which she established herself to read. She had often longed to sit there in the afternoon and watch the sun creeping across the flags, pursued by the shadow, till each small bit of moss and blade of grass had received its daily portion of warmth. For though the place had been cleared and weeded, the tiny green things still grew in the chinks of the pavement. In the middle of the court was a well, with a cover and yoke of old-fashioned twisted iron, and a pulley to draw the water. The air was bright

and fresh outside the castle, but the reverberating rays of the sun made the quiet courtyard warm and still.

Sick with her daily torture of mind, the fair, pale girl rested her, at last, and dreaming of liberty drew strength from the soft stillness. The book fell on her lap, her head leaned back against the rough stones of the wall, and gradually, as she watched from beneath her half-closed lids the play of the stealing sunlight, she fell into a sweet sleep.

She was soon disturbed by that indescribable uneasiness that creeps through our dreams when we are asleep in the presence of danger. A weird horror possesses us, and makes the objects in the dream appear unnatural. Gradually the terror grows on us and thrills us, and we wake, with bristling hair and staring eyes, to the hideous consciousness of unexpected peril.

Hedwig started and raised her lids, following the direction of her dream. She was not mistaken. Opposite her stood her arch-horror, Benoni. He leaned carelessly against the stone well, and his bright brown eyes were riveted

upon her. His tall, thin figure was clad, as usual, in all the extreme of fashion, and one of his long, bony hands toyed with his watch-chain. His animated face seemed aglow with the pleasure of contemplation, and the sunshine lent a yellow tinge to his snowy hair.

"An exquisite picture, indeed, countess," he said, without moving. "I trust your dreams were as sweet as they looked?"

"They were sweet, sir," she answered coldly, after a moment's pause, during which she looked steadily toward him.

"I regret that I should have disturbed them," he said, with a deferential bow; and he came and sat by her side, treading as lightly as a boy across the flags. Hedwig shuddered and drew her dark skirts about her as he sat down.

"You cannot regret it more than I do," she said, in tones of ice. She would not take refuge in the house, for it would have seemed like an ignominious flight. Benoni crossed one leg over the other, and asked permission to smoke, which she granted by an indifferent motion of her fair head.

"So we are left all alone to-day, countess," remarked Benoni, blowing rings of smoke in the quiet air.

Hedwig vouchsafed no answer.

"We are left alone," he repeated, seeing that she was silent, "and I make it hereby my business and my pleasure to amuse you."

"You are good, sir. But I thank you. I need no entertainment of your devising."

"That is eminently unfortunate," returned the baron, with his imperturbable smile, "for I am universally considered to be the most amusing of mortals,—if, indeed, I am mortal at all, which I sometimes doubt."

"Do you reckon yourself with the gods, then?" asked Hedwig scornfully. "Which of them are you? Jove? Dionysus? Apollo?"

"Nay, rather Phaethon, who soared too high——"

"Your mythology is at fault, sir,—he drove too low; and besides, he was not immortal."

"It is the same. He was wide of the mark, as I am. Tell me, countess, are your wits always so ready?"

"You, at least, will always find them so," she answered, bitterly.

"You are unkind. You stab my vanity, as you have pierced my heart."

At this speech Hedwig raised her eyebrows and stared at him in silence. Any other man would have taken the chilling rebuke and left her. Benoni put on a sad expression.

"You used not to hate me as you do now," he said.

"That is true. I hated you formerly because I hated you."

"And now?" asked Benoni, with a short laugh.

"I hate you now because I loathe you." She uttered this singular saying indifferently, as being part of her daily thoughts.

"You have the courage of your opinions, countess," he replied, with a very bitter smile.

"Yes? It is the only courage a woman need have." There was a pause, during which Benoni puffed much smoke and stroked his white moustache. Hedwig turned over the leaves of her book, as though hinting to him to go. But he had no idea of that. A man who will not go

because a woman loathes him will certainly not leave her for a hint.

"Countess," he began again, at last, "will you listen to me?"

"I suppose I must. I presume my father has left you here to insult me at your noble leisure."

"Ah, countess, dear countess,"—she shrank away from him,—"you should know me better than to believe me capable of anything so monstrous. I insult you? Gracious heaven! I, who adore you; who worship the holy ground whereon you tread; who would preserve the precious air you have breathed in vessels of virgin crystal; who would give a drop of my blood for every word you vouchsafe me, kind or cruel,—I, who look on you as the only divinity in this desolate heathen world, who reverence you and do you daily homage, who adore you"——

"You manifest your adoration in a singular manner, sir," said Hedwig, interrupting him with something of her father's severity.

"I show it as best I can," the old scoundrel pleaded, working himself into a passion of words. "My life, my fortune, my name, my honour,—I

cast them at your feet. For you I will be a hermit, a saint, dwelling in solitary places and doing good works; or I will brave every danger the narrow earth holds, by sea and land, for you. What? Am I decrepit, or bent, or misshapen, that my white hair should cry out against me? Am I hideous, or doting, or half-witted, as old men are? I am young; I am strong, active, enduring. I have all the gifts, for you."

The baron was speaking French, and perhaps these wild praises of himself might pass current in a foreign language. But when Nino detailed the conversation to me in our good, simple Italian speech, it sounded so amazingly ridiculous that I nearly broke my sides with laughing.

Hedwig laughed also, and so loudly that the foolish old man was disconcerted. He had succeeded in amusing her sooner than he had expected. As I have told you, the baron is a most impulsive person, though he is poisoned with evil from his head to his heart.

"All women are alike," he said, and his manner suddenly changed.

"I fancy," said Hedwig, recovering from her

merriment, "that if you address them as you have addressed me you will find them very much alike indeed."

"What good can women do in the world?" sighed Benoni, as though speaking with himself. "You do nothing but harm with your cold calculations and your bitter jests." Hedwig was silent. "Tell me," he continued presently, "if I speak soberly, by the card as it were, will you listen to me?"

"Oh, I have said that I will listen to you!" cried Hedwig, losing patience.

"Hedwig von Lira, I hereby offer you my fortune, my name, and myself. I ask you to marry me of your own good-will and pleasure." Hedwig once more raised her brows.

"Baron Benoni, I will not marry you, either for your fortune, your name, or yourself,—nor for any other consideration under heaven. And I will ask you not to address me by my Christian name." There was a long silence after this speech, and Benoni carefully lighted a second cigarette. Hedwig would have risen and entered the house, but she felt safer in the free air of the sunny

court. As for Benoni, he had no intention of going.

"I suppose you are aware, countess," he said at last, coldly eying her, "that your father has set his heart upon our union?"

"I am aware of it."

"But you are not aware of the consequences of your refusal. I am your only chance of freedom. Take me, and you have the world at your feet. Refuse me, and you will languish in this hideous place so long as your affectionate father pleases."

"Do you know my father so little, sir," asked Hedwig very proudly, "as to suppose that his daughter will ever yield to force?"

"It is one thing to talk of not yielding, and it is quite another to bear prolonged suffering with constancy," returned Benoni coolly, as though he were discussing a general principle instead of expounding to a woman the fate she had to expect if she refused to marry him. "I never knew any one who did not talk bravely of resisting torture until it was applied. Oh, you will be weak at the end, countess, believe me. You

are weak now; and changed, though perhaps you would be better pleased if I did not notice it. Yes, I smile now,—I laugh. I can afford to. You can be merry over me because I love you, but I can be merry at what you must suffer if you will not love me. Do not look so proud, countess. You know what follows pride, if the proverb lies not."

During this insulting speech Hedwig had risen to her feet, and in the act to go she turned and looked at him in utter scorn. She could not comprehend the nature of a man who could so coldly threaten her. If ever any one of us can fathom Benoni's strange character, we may hope to understand that phase of it along with the rest. He seemed as indifferent to his own mistakes and follies as to the sufferings of others.

"Sir," she said, "whatever may be the will of my father, I will not permit you to discuss it, still less to hold up his anger as a threat to scare me. You need not follow me," she added, as he rose.

"I will follow you, whether you wish it or not, countess," he said, fiercely; and, as she flew across

the court to the door, he strode swiftly by her side hissing his words into her ear. "I will follow you to tell you that I know more of you than you think, and I know how little right you have to be so proud. I know your lover. I know of your meetings, your comings and your goings——" They reached the door, but Benoni barred the way with his long arm, and seemed about to lay a hand upon her wrist, so that she shrank back against the heavy doorpost, in an agony of horror and loathing and wounded pride. "I know Cardegna, and I knew the poor baroness who killed herself because he basely abandoned her. Ah, you never heard the truth before? I trust it is pleasant to you. As he left her he has left you. He will never come back. I saw him in Paris three weeks ago. I could tell tales not fit for your ears. And for him you will die in this horrible place unless you consent. For him you have thrown away everything,—name, fame, and happiness,—unless you will take all these from me. Oh, I know, you will cry out that it is untrue; but my eyes are good, though you call me old! For this

treacherous boy, with his curly hair, you have lost the only thing that makes woman human,—your reputation!" And Benoni laughed that horrid laugh of his, till the court rang again, as though there were devils in every corner, and beneath every eave, and everywhere.

People who are loud in their anger are sometimes dangerous, for it is genuine while it lasts. People whose anger is silent are generally either incapable of honest wrath or cowards. But there are some in the world whose passion shows itself in few words but strong ones, and proceeds instantly to action.

Hedwig had stood back against the stone casing of the entrance, at first, overcome with the intensity of what she suffered. But as Benoni laughed she moved slowly forwards till she was close to him, and only his outstretched arm barred the doorway.

"Every word you have spoken is a lie, and you know it. Let me pass, or I will kill you with my hands!"

The words came low and distinct to his excited ear, like the tolling of a passing bell.

Her face must have been dreadful to see, and Benoni was suddenly fascinated and terrified at the concentrated anger that blazed in her blue eyes. His arm dropped to his side, and Hedwig passed proudly through the door, in all the majesty of innocence, gathering her skirts, lest they should touch his feet or any part of him. She never hastened her step as she ascended the broad stairs within and went to her own little sitting-room, made gay with books and flowers and photographs from Rome. Nor was her anger followed by any passionate outburst of tears. She sat herself down by the window and looked out, letting the cool breeze from the open casement fan her face.

Hedwig, too, had passed through a violent scene that day, and, having conquered, she sat down to think over it. She reflected that Benoni had but used the same words to her that she had daily heard from her father's lips. False as was their accusation, she submitted to hearing her father speak them, for she had no knowledge of their import, and only thought him cruelly hard with her. But that a stranger—above all,

a man who aspired, or pretended to aspire, to her hand—should attempt to usurp the same authority of speech was beyond all human endurance. She felt sure that her father's anger would all be turned against Benoni when he heard her story.

As for what her tormentor had said of Nino, she could have killed him for saying it, but she knew that it was a lie; for she loved Nino with all her heart, and no one can love wholly without trusting wholly. Therefore she put away the evil suggestion from herself, and loaded all its burden of treachery upon Benoni.

How long she sat by the window, compelling her strained thoughts into order, no one can tell. It might have been an hour, or more, for she had lost the account of the hours. She was roused by a knock at the door of her sitting-room, and at her bidding the man entered who, for the trifling consideration of about a thousand francs, first and last, made communication possible between Hedwig and myself.

This man's name is Temistocle,—Themistocles, no less. All servants are Themistocles, or Orestes, or Joseph, just as all gardeners are

called Antonio. Perhaps he deserves some description. He is a type, short, wiry, and broad-shouldered, with a cunning eye, a long, hooked nose, and very plentiful black whiskers, surmounted by a perfectly bald crown. His motions are servile to the last degree, and he addresses every one in authority as "excellency," on the principle that it is better to give too much titular homage than too little. He is as wily as a fox, and so long as you have money in your pocket, as faithful as a hound and as silent as the grave. I perceive that these are precisely the epithets at which the baron scoffed, saying that a man can be praised only by comparing him with the higher animals, or insulted by comparison with himself and his kind. We call a man a fool, an idiot, a coward, a liar, a traitor, and many other things applicable only to man himself. However, I will let my description stand, for it is a very good one; and Temistocle could be induced, for money, to adapt himself to almost any description, and he certainly had earned, at one time or another, most of the titles I have enumerated.

He told me, months afterwards, that when he passed through the courtyard, on his way to Hedwig's apartment, he found Benoni seated on the stone bench, smoking a cigarette and gazing into space, so that he passed close before him without being noticed.

CHAPTER VIII.

TEMISTOCLE closed the door, then opened it again, and looked out, after which he finally shut it, and seemed satisfied. He advanced with cautious tread to where Hedwig sat by the window.

"Well? What have you done?" she inquired, without looking at him. It is a hard thing for a proud and noble girl to be in the power of a servant. The man took Nino's letter from his pocket, and handed it to her upon his open palm. Hedwig tried hard to take it with indifference, but she acknowledges that her fingers trembled and her heart beat fast.

"I was to deliver a message to your excellency from the old gentleman," said Temistocle, coming close to her and bending down.

"Ah!" said Hedwig, beginning to break the envelope.

"Yes, excellency. He desired me to say that it was absolutely and most indubitably necessary that your excellency should be at the little door to-night at twelve o'clock. Do not fear, Signora Contessina; we can manage it very well."

"I do not wish to know what you advise me to fear, or not to fear," answered Hedwig, haughtily; for she could not bear to feel that the man should counsel her or encourage her.

"Pardon, excellency; I thought——" began Temistocle humbly; but Hedwig interrupted him.

"Temistocle," she said, "I have no money to give you, as I told you yesterday. But here is another stone, like the other. Take it, and arrange this matter as best you can."

Temistocle took the jewel and bowed to the ground, eying curiously the little case from which she had taken it.

"I have thought and combined everything," he said. "Your excellency will see that it is best you should go alone to the staircase; for, as we say, a mouse makes less noise than a rat. When you have descended, lock the door at the

top behind you; and when you reach the foot of the staircase, keep that door open. I will have brought the old gentleman by that time, and you will let me in. I shall go out by the great gate."

"Why not go with me?" inquired Hedwig.

"Because, your excellency, one person is less likely to be seen than two. Your excellency will let me pass you. I will mount the staircase, unlock the upper door, and change the key to the other side. Then I will keep watch, and if any one comes I will lock the door and slip away till he is gone."

"I do not like the plan," said Hedwig. "I would rather let myself in from the staircase."

"But suppose any one were waiting on the inside, and saw you come back?"

"That is true. Give me the keys, Temistocle, and a taper and some matches."

"Your excellency is a paragon of courage," replied the servant, obsequiously. "Since yesterday I have carried the keys in my pocket. I will bring you the taper this evening."

"Bring it now. I wish to be ready."

Temistocle departed on the errand. When he returned Hedwig ordered him to give a message to her father.

"When the count comes home, ask him to see me," she said. Temistocle bowed once more, and was gone.

Yes, she would see her father, and tell him plainly what she had suffered from Benoni. She felt that no father, however cruel, would allow his daughter to be so treated, and she would detail the conversation to him.

She had not been able to read Nino's letter, for she feared the servant, knowing the writing to be Italian and legible to him. Now she hastened to drink in its message of love. You cannot suppose that I know exactly what he said, but he certainly set forth at some length his proposal that she should leave her father, and escape with her lover from the bondage in which she was now held. He told her modestly of his success, in so far as it was necessary that she should understand his position. It must have been a very eloquent letter, for it nearly persuaded her to a step of which she had wildly

dreamed, indeed, but which in her calmer moments she regarded as impossible.

The interminable afternoon was drawing to a close, and once more she sat by the open window, regardless of the increasing cold. Suddenly it all came over her,—the tremendous importance of the step she was about to take, if she should take Nino at his word, and really break from one life into another. The long-restrained tears, that had been bound from flowing through all Benoni's insults and her own anger, trickled silently down her cheek, no longer pale, but bright and flushed at the daring thought of freedom.

At first it seemed far off, as seen in a magician's glass. She looked, and saw herself as another person, acting a part only half known and half understood. But gradually her own individual soul entered into the figure of her imagination; her eager heart beat fast; she breathed and moved and acted in the future. She was descending the dark steps alone, listening with supernatural sense of sound for her lover's tread without. It came; the door opened, and she was in his arms,—in those strong arms that

could protect her from insult and tyranny and cruel wooing; out in the night, on the road, in Rome, married, free, and made blessed for ever. On a sudden the artificial imagery of her labouring brain fell away, and the thought crossed her mind that henceforth she must be an orphan. Her father would never speak to her again, or ever own for his a daughter that had done such a deed. Like icy water poured upon a fevered body, the idea chilled her and woke her to reality.

Did she love her father? She had loved him —yes, until she crossed his will. She loved him still, when she could be so horror-struck at the thought of incurring his lasting anger. Could she bear it? Could she find in her lover all that she must renounce of a father's care and a father's affection,—stern affection, that savoured of the despot,—but could she hurt him so?

The image of her father seemed to take another shape, and gradually to assume the form and features of the one man of the world whom she hated, converting itself little by little into Benoni. She hid her face in her hands and

terror staunched the tears that had flown afresh at the thought of orphanhood.

A knock at the door. She hastily concealed the crumpled letter.

"Come in!" she answered, boldly; and her father, moving mechanically, with his stick in his hand, entered the room. He came as he had dismounted from his horse, in his riding boots, and his broad felt hat caught by the same fingers that held the stick.

"You wished to see me, Hedwig," he said, coldly, depositing his hat upon the table. Then, when he had slowly sat himself down in an arm-chair, he added, "Here I am." Hedwig had risen respectfully, and stood before him in the twilight. "What do you wish to say?" he asked in German. "You do not often honour your father by requesting his society."

Hedwig stood one moment in silence. Her first impulse was to throw herself at his feet and implore him to let her marry Nino. The thought swept away for the time the remembrance of Benoni and of what she had to tell. But a second sufficed to give her the mastery of her

tongue and memory, which women seldom lose completely, even at the most desperate moments.

"I desired to tell you," she said, "that Baron Benoni took advantage of your absence to-day to insult me beyond my endurance." She looked boldly into her father's eyes as she spoke.

"Ah!" said he, with great coolness. "Will you be good enough to light one of those candles on the table, and to close the window?"

Hedwig obeyed in silence, and once more planted herself before him, her slim figure looking ghostly between the fading light of the departing day and the yellow flame of the candle.

"You need not assume this theatrical air," said Lira, calmly. "I presume you mean that Baron Benoni asked you to marry him?"

"Yes, that is one thing, and is an insult in itself," replied Hedwig, without changing her position.

"I suspect that it is the principal thing," remarked the count. "Very good; he asked you to marry him. He has my full authority to do so. What then?"

"You are my father," answered Hedwig,

standing like a statue before him, "and you have the right to offer me whom you please for a husband. But you have no authority to allow me to be wantonly insulted."

"I think that you are out of your mind," said the count, with imperturbable equanimity. "You grant that I may propose a suitor to you, and you call it a wanton insult when that suitor respectfully asks the honour of your hand, merely because he is not young enough to suit your romantic tastes, which have been fostered by this wretched southern air. It is unfortunate that my health requires me to reside in Italy. Had you enjoyed an orderly Prussian education, you would have held different views in regard to filial duty. Refuse Baron Benoni as often as you like. I will stay here, and so will he, I fancy, until you change your mind. I am not tired of this lordly mountain scenery, and my health improves daily. We can pass the summer and winter, and more summers and winters, very comfortably here. If there is anything you would like to have brought from Rome, inform me, and I will satisfy any reasonable request."

"The baron has already had the audacity to inform me that you would keep me a prisoner until I should marry him," said Hedwig; and her voice trembled as she remembered how Benoni had told her so.

"I doubt not that Benoni, who is a man of consummate tact, hinted delicately that he would not desist from pressing his suit. You, well knowing my determination, and carried away by your evil temper, have magnified into a threat what he never intended as such. Pray let me hear no more about these fancied insults." The old man smiled grimly at his keen perception.

"You shall hear me, nevertheless," said Hedwig, in a low voice, coming close to the table and resting one hand upon it as though for support.

"My daughter," said the count, "I desire you to abandon this highly theatrical and melodramatic tone. I am not to be imposed upon."

"Baron Benoni did not confine himself to the course you describe. He said many things to me that I did not understand, but I comprehended their import. He began by making absurd speeches, at which I laughed. Then he asked

me to marry him, as I had long known he would do as soon as you gave him the opportunity. I refused his offer. Then he insisted, saying that you, sir, had determined on this marriage, and would keep me a close prisoner here until the torture of the situation broke down my strength. I assured him that I would never yield to force. Then he broke out angrily, telling me to my face that I had lost everything,—name, fame, and honour,—how, I cannot tell; but he said those words; and he added that I could regain my reputation only by consenting to marry him."

The old count had listened at first with a sarcastic smile, then with increased attention. Finally, as Hedwig repeated the shameful insult, his brave old blood boiled up in his breast, and he sat gripping the two arms of his chair fiercely, while his gray eyes shot fire from beneath the shaggy brows.

"Hedwig," he cried, hoarsely, "are you speaking the truth? Did he say those words?"

"Yes, my father, and more like them. Are you surprised?" she asked, bitterly. "You have said them yourself to me."

The old man's rage rose furiously, and he struggled to his feet. He was stiff with riding and rheumatism, but he was too angry to sit still.

"I? Yes, I have tried to show you what might have happened, and to warn you and frighten you, as you should be frightened. Yes, and I was right, for you shall not drag my name in the dirt. But another man,—Benoni!" He could not speak for his wrath, and his tall figure moved rapidly about the room, his heart seeking expression in action. He looked like some forgotten creature of harm, suddenly galvanised into destructive life. It was well that Benoni was not within reach.

Hedwig stood calmly by the table, proud in her soul that her father should be roused to such fury. The old man paused in his walk, came to her, and with his hand turned her face to the light, gazing savagely into her eyes.

"You never told me a lie," he growled out.

"Never," she said, boldly, as she faced him scornfully. He knew his own temper in his child, and was satisfied. The soldier's habit of self-control was strong in him, and the sardonic

humour of his nature served as a garment to the thoughts he harboured.

"It appears," he said, "that I am to spend the remainder of an honourable life in fighting with a pack of hounds. I nearly killed your old acquaintance, the Signor Professore Cardegna, this afternoon." Hedwig staggered back, and turned pale.

"What! Is he wounded?" she gasped out, pressing her hand to her side.

"Ha! That touches you almost as closely as Benoni's insult," he said, savagely. "I am glad of it. I repent me, and wish that I had killed him. We met on the road, and he had the impertinence to ask me for your hand,—I am sick of these daily proposals of marriage; and then I inquired if he meant to insult me."

Hedwig leaned heavily on the table, in an agony of suspense.

"The fellow answered that if I were insulted he was ready to fight then and there, in the road, with my pistols. He is no coward, your lover, —I will say that. The end of it was that I came home, and he did not."

Hedwig sank into the chair that her father had left, and hid her face.

"Oh, you have killed him!" she moaned.

"No," said the count shortly; "I did not touch a hair of his head. But he rode away toward Trevi." Hedwig breathed again. "Are you satisfied?" he asked, with a hard smile, enjoying the terror he had excited.

"Oh, how cruel you are, my father!" she said, in a broken voice.

"I tell you that if I could cure you of your insane passion for this singer fellow, I would be as cruel as the Inquisition," retorted the count. "Now listen to me. You will not be troubled any longer with Benoni,—the beast! I will teach him a lesson of etiquette. You need not appear at dinner to-night. But you are not to suppose that our residence here is at an end. When you have made up your mind to act sensibly, and to forget the Signor Cardegna, you shall return to society, where you may select a husband of your own position and fortune, if you choose; or you may turn Romanist, and go into a convent, and devote yourself to good works and idolatry, or

anything else. I do not pretend to care what becomes of you, so long as you show any decent respect for your name. But if you persist in pining and moaning and starving yourself, because I will not allow you to turn dancer and marry a strolling player, you will have to remain here. I am not such pleasant company when I am bored, I can tell you, and my enthusiasm for the beauties of nature is probably transitory."

"I can bear anything if you will remove Benoni," said Hedwig, quietly, as she rose from her seat. But the pressure of the iron keys that she had hidden in her bosom gave her a strange sensation.

"Never fear," said the count, taking his hat from the table. "You shall be amply avenged of Benoni and his foul tongue. I may not love my daughter, but no one shall insult her. I will have a word with him this evening."

"I thank you for that, at least," said Hedwig, as he moved to the door.

"Do not mention it," said he, and put his hand on the lock.

A sudden impulse seized Hedwig. She ran swiftly to him, and clasped her hands upon his arm.

"Father?" she cried, pleadingly.

"What?"

"Father, do you love me?" He hesitated one moment.

"No," he said, sternly; "you disobey me;" and he went out in rough haste. The door closed behind him, and she was left standing alone. What could she do, poor child? For months he had tormented her and persecuted her, and now she had asked him plainly if she still held a place in his heart, and he had coldly denied it.

A gentle, tender maiden, love-sick and mind-sick, yearning so piteously for a little mercy, or sympathy, or kindness, and treated like a mutinous soldier, because she loved so honestly and purely,—is it any wonder that her hand went to her bosom and clasped the cold, hard keys that promised her life and freedom? I think not. I have no patience with young women who allow themselves to be carried away by an innate bad taste and love for effect,

quarrelling with the peaceful destiny that a kind Providence has vouchsafed them, and with an existence which they are too dull to make interesting to themselves or to any one else; finally making a desperate and foolish dash at notoriety by a runaway marriage with the first scamp they can find, and repenting in poverty and social ostracism the romance they conceived in wealth and luxury. They deserve their fate. But when a sensitive girl is motherless, cut off from friends and pleasures, presented with the alternative of solitude or marriage with some detested man, or locked up to forget a dream which was half realised and very sweet, then the case is different. If she breaks her bonds, and flies to the only loving heart she knows, forgive her, and pray Heaven to have mercy on her, for she takes a fearful leap into the dark.

Hedwig felt the keys, and took them from her dress, and pressed them to her cheek, and her mind was made up. She glanced at the small gilt clock, and saw that the hands pointed to seven. Five hours were before her in which to make her preparations, such as they could be.

In accordance with her father's orders, given when he left her, Temistocle served her dinner in her sitting-room; and the uncertainty of the night's enterprise demanded that she should eat something, lest her strength should fail at the critical moment. Temistocle volunteered the information that her father had gone to the baron's apartment, and had not been seen since. She heard in silence, and bade the servant leave her as soon as he had ministered to her wants. Then she wrote a short letter to her father, telling him that she had left him, since he had no place for her in his heart, and that she had gone to the one man who seemed ready both to love and to protect her. This missive she folded, sealed, and laid in a prominent place upon the table addressed to the count.

She made a small bundle,—very neatly, for she is clever with her fingers,—and put on a dark travelling dress, in the folds of which she sewed such jewels as were small and valuable and her own. She would take nothing that her father had given her. In all this she displayed perfect coolness and foresight.

The castle became intensely quiet as the evening advanced. She sat watching the clock. At five minutes before midnight she took her bundle and her little shoes in her hand, blew out her candle, and softly left the room.

CHAPTER IX.

I NEED not tell you how I passed all the time from Nino's leaving me until he came back in the evening, just as I could see from my window that the full moon was touching the tower of the castle. I sat looking out, expecting him, and I was the most anxious professor that ever found himself in a ridiculous position. Temistocle had come, and you know what had passed between us, and how we had arranged the plan of the night. Most heartily did I wish myself in the little amphitheatre of my lecture-room at the University, instead of being pledged to this wild plot of my boy's invention. But there was no drawing back. I had been myself to the little stable next door, where I had kept my donkey, and visited him daily since my arrival, and I had made sure that I could have him at a moment's notice by put-

ting on the cumbrous saddle. Moreover, I had secretly made a bundle of my effects, and had succeeded in taking it unobserved to the stall, and I tied it to the pommel. I also told my landlady that I was going away in the morning with the young gentleman who had visited me, and who, I said, was the engineer who was going to make a new road to the Serra. This was not quite true; but lies that hurt no one are not lies at all, as you all know, and the curiosity of the old woman was satisfied. I also paid for my lodging, and gave her a franc for herself, which pleased her very much. I meant to steal away about ten o'clock, or as soon as I had seen Nino and communicated to him the result of my interview with Temistocle.

The hours seemed endless, in spite of my preparations, which occupied some time; so I went out when I had eaten my supper, and visited my ass, and gave him a little bread that was left, thinking it would strengthen him for the journey. Then I came back to my room, and watched. Just as the moonlight was shooting over the hill, Nino rode up the street. I knew him in the

dusk by his broad hat, and also because he was humming a little tune through his nose, as he generally does. But he rode past my door without looking up, for he meant to put his mule in the stable for a rest.

At last he came in, still humming, and apologised for the delay, saying he had stopped a few minutes at the inn to get some supper. It could not have been a very substantial meal that he ate in that short time.

"What did the man say?" was his first question, as he sat down.

"He said it should be managed as I desired," I answered. "Of course I did not mention you. Temistocle—that is his name—will come at midnight, and take you to the door. There you will find this inamorata, this lady-love of yours, for whom you are about to turn the world upside-down."

"What will you do yourself, Sor Cornelio?" he asked, smiling.

"I will go now and get my donkey, and quietly ride up the valley to the Serra di Sant' Antonio," I said. "I am sure that the signorina

will be more at her ease if I accompany you. I am a very proper person, you see."

"Yes," said Nino, pensively, "you are very proper. And besides, you can be a witness of the civil marriage."

"Diavolo!" I cried, "a marriage! I had not thought of that."

"Blood of a dog!" exclaimed Nino, "what on earth did you think of?" He was angry all in a moment.

"Piano,—do not disquiet yourself, my boy. I had not realised that the wedding was so near, —that is all. Of course you will be married in Rome, as soon as ever we get there."

"We shall be married in Ceprano to-morrow night, by the sindaco, or the mayor, or whatever civil bishop they support in that God-forsaken Neapolitan town," said Nino, with great determination.

"Oh, very well; manage it as you like. Only be careful that it is properly done, and have it registered," I added. "Meanwhile, I will start."

"You need not go yet, caro mio; it is not nine o'clock."

"How far do you think I ought to go, Nino?" I inquired. To tell the truth, the idea of going up the Serra alone was not so attractive in the evening as it had been in the morning light. I thought it would be very dark among those trees, and I had still a great deal of money sewn between my waistcoats.

"Oh, you need not go so very far," said Nino. "Three or four miles from the town will be enough. I will wait in the street below, after eleven."

We sat in silence for some time afterwards, and if I was thinking of the gloomy ride before me, I am sure that Nino was thinking of Hedwig. Poor fellow! I dare say he was anxious enough to see her, after being away for two months, and spending so many hours almost within her reach. He sat low in his chair, and the dismal rays of the solitary tallow candle cast deep shadows on his thoughtful face. Weary, perhaps, with waiting and with long travel, yet not sad, but very hopeful, he looked. No fatigue could destroy the strong, manly expression of his features, and even in that squalid room, by the miserable light,

dressed in his plain gray clothes, he was still the man of success, who could hold thousands in the suspense of listening to his slightest utterance. Nino is a wonderful man, and I am convinced that there is more in him than music, which is well enough when one can be as great as he, but is not all, the world holds. I am sure that massive head of his was not hammered so square and broad by the great hands that forge the thunderbolts of nations, merely that he should be a tenor and an actor, and give pleasure to his fellow-men. I see there the power and the strength of a broader mastery than that which bends the ears of a theatre audience. One day we may see it. It needs the fire of hot times to fuse the elements of greatness in the crucible of revolution. There is not such another head in all Italy as Nino's that I have ever seen, and I have seen the best in Rome. He looked so grand, as he sat there, thinking over the future. I am not praising his face for its beauty; there is little enough of that, as women might judge. And besides, you will laugh at my ravings, and say that a singer is a singer, and nothing more,

for all his life. Well, we shall see in twenty years; you will,—perhaps I shall not.

"Nino," I asked, irrelevantly, following my own train of reflection, "have you ever thought of anything but music—and love?" He roused himself from his reverie, and stared at me.

"How should you be able to guess my thoughts?" he asked at last.

"People who have lived much together often read each other's minds. What were you thinking of?" Nino sighed, and hesitated a moment before he answered.

"I was thinking," he said, "that a musician's destiny, even the highest, is a poor return for a woman's love."

"You see: I was thinking of you, and wondering whether, after all, you will always be a singer."

"That is singular," he answered, slowly. "I was reflecting how utterly small my success on the stage will look to me when I have married Hedwig von Lira."

"There is a larger stage, Nino mio, than yours."

"I know it," said he, and fell back in his chair again, dreaming.

I fancy that at any other time we might have fallen into conversation and speculated on the good old-fashioned simile which likens life to a comedy, or a tragedy, or a farce. But the moment was ill chosen, and we were both silent, being much preoccupied with the immediate future.

A little before ten I made up my mind to start. I glanced once more round the room to see if I had left anything. Nino was still sitting in his chair, his head bent, and his eyes staring at the floor.

"Nino," I said, "I am going now. Here is another candle, which you will need before long, for these tallow things are very short." Indeed, the one that burned was already guttering low in the old brass candlestick. Nino rose and shook himself.

"My dear friend," he said, taking me by both hands, "you know that I am grateful to you. I thank you and thank you again with all my heart. Yes, you ought to go now, for the time

is approaching. We shall join you, if all goes well, by one o'clock."

"But, Nino, if you do not come?"

"I will come, alone, or with her. If—if I should not be with you by two in the morning, go on alone, and get out of the way. It will be because I am caught by that old Prussian devil. Good-by." He embraced me affectionately, and I went out. A quarter of an hour later I was out of the town, picking my way, with my little donkey, over the desolate path that leads toward the black Serra. The clatter of the beast's hoofs over the stones kept time with the beatings of my heart, and I pressed my thin legs close to his thinner sides for company.

When Nino was left alone,—and all this I know from him,—he sat again in the chair, and meditated; and although the time of the greatest event in his life was very near, he was so much absorbed that he was startled when he looked at his watch and found that it was half past eleven. He had barely time to make his preparations. His man was warned, but was waiting near the inn, not knowing where he was required, as Nino

himself had not been to ascertain the position of the lower door, fearing lest he might be seen by Benoni. He now hastily extinguished the light, and let himself out of the house without noise. He found his countryman ready with the mules, ordered him to come with him, and returned to the house, instructing him to follow and wait at a short distance from the door he would enter. Muffled in his cloak, he stood in the street, awaiting the messenger from Hedwig.

The crazy old clock of the church tolled the hour, and a man wrapped in a nondescript garment, between a cloak and an overcoat, stole along the moonlit street to where Nino stood, in front of my lodging.

"Temistocle!" called Nino, in a low voice, as the fellow hesitated.

"Excellency"—answered the man, and then drew back. "You are not the Signor Grandi!" he cried, in alarm.

"It is the same thing," replied Nino. "Let us go."

"But how is this?" objected Temistocle, seeing a new development. "It was the Signor

Grandi whom I was to conduct." Nino was silent, but there was a crisp sound in the air as he took a banknote from his pocket-book. "Diavolo!" muttered the servant, "perhaps it may be right, after all." Nino gave him the note.

"That is my passport," said he.

"I have doubts," answered Temistocle, taking it, nevertheless, and examining it by the moonlight. "It has no *visa*," he added, with a cunning leer. Nino gave him another. Then Temistocle had no more doubts.

"I will conduct your excellency," he said. They moved away, and Temistocle was so deaf that he did not hear the mules and the tramp of the man who led them, not ten paces behind him.

Passing round the rock they found themselves in the shadow; a fact which Nino noted with much satisfaction, for he feared lest some one might be keeping late hours in the castle. The mere noise of the mules would attract no attention in a mountain town, where the country people start for their distant work at all hours of the day and night. They came to the door. Nino called softly to the man with the mules to

wait in the shadow, and Temistocle knocked at the door. The key ground in the lock from within, but the hands that held it seemed weak. Nino's heart beat fast.

"Temistocle!" called Hedwig's trembling voice.

"What is the matter, your excellency?" asked the servant through the keyhole, not forgetting his manners.

"Oh, I cannot turn the key! What *shall* I do?"

Nino heard, and pushed the servant aside.

"Courage, my dear lady," he said, aloud, that she might know his voice. Hedwig appeared to make a frantic effort, and a little sound of pain escaped her as she hurt her hands.

"Oh, what *shall* I do!" she cried, piteously. "I locked it last night, and now I cannot turn the key!"

Nino pressed with all his weight against the door. Fortunately, it was strong, or he would have broken it in, and it would have fallen upon her. But it opened outward, and was heavily bound with iron. Nino groaned.

"Has your excellency a taper?" asked Temis-

tocle suddenly, forcing his head between Nino's body and the door, in order to be heard.

"Yes. I put it out."

"And matches?" he asked again.

"Yes."

"Then let your excellency light the taper, and drop some of the burning wax on the end of the key. It will be like oil." There was a silence. The key was withdrawn, and a light appeared through the hole where it had been. Nino instantly fastened his eye to the aperture, hoping to catch a glimpse of Hedwig. But he could not see anything save two white hands trying to cover the key with wax. He withdrew his eye quickly, as the hands pushed the key through again.

Again the lock groaned,—a little sob of effort, another trial, and the bolts flew back to their sockets. The prudent Temistocle, who did not wish to be a witness of what followed, pretended to exert gigantic strength in pulling the door open, and Nino, seeing him, drew back a moment to let him pass.

"Your excellency need only knock at the

upper door," he said to Hedwig, "and I will open. I will watch, lest any one should enter from above."

"You may watch till the rising of the dead," thought Nino, and Hedwig stood aside on the narrow step, while Temistocle went up. One instant more, and Nino was at her feet, kissing the hem of her dress, and speechless with happiness, for his tears of joy flowed fast.

Tenderly Hedwig bent to him, and laid her two hands on his bare head, pressing down the thick and curly hair with a trembling, passionate motion.

"Signor Cardegna, you must not kneel there, —nay, sir, I know you love me! Would I have come to you else? Give me your hand—now —do not kiss it so hard—no— Oh, Nino, my own dear Nino——"

What should have followed in her gentle speech is lacking, for many and most sweet reasons. I need not tell you that the taper was extinguished, and they stood locked in each other's arms against the open door, with only the reflection of the moon from the houses opposite to illuminate their meeting.

There was and is to me something divinely perfect and godlike in these two virgin hearts, each so new to their love, and each so true and spotless of all other. I am old to say sweet things of loving, but I cannot help it; for though I never was as they are, I have loved much in my time. Like our own dear Leopardi, I loved not the woman, but the angel which is the type of all women, and whom not finding I perished miserably as to my heart. But in my breast there is still the temple where the angel dwelt, and the shrine is very fragrant still with the divine scent of the heavenly roses that were about her. I think, also, that all those who love in this world must have such a holy place of worship in their hearts. Sometimes the kingdom of the soul and the palace of the body are all Love's, made beautiful and rich with rare offerings of great constancy and faith; and all the countless creations of transcendent genius, and all the vast aspirations of far-reaching power, go up in reverent order to do homage at Love's altar, before they come forth, like giants, to make the great world tremble and reel in its giddy grooves.

And with another it is different. The world is not his; he is the world's, and all his petty doings have its gaudy stencil blotched upon them. Yet haply even he has a heart, and somewhere in its fruitless fallows stands a poor ruin, that never was of much dignity at its best, —poor and broken, and half choked with weeds and briers; but even thus the weeds are fragrant herbs, and the briers are wild roses, of few and misshapen petals, but sweet, nevertheless. For this ruin was once a shrine too, that his mean hands and sterile soul did try most ineffectually to build up as a shelter for all that was ever worthy in him.

Now, therefore, I say, Love, and love truly and long,—even for ever; and if you can do other things well, do them; but if not, at least learn to do that, for it is a very gentle thing, and sweet in the learning. Some of you laugh at me, and say, Behold this old-fashioned driveller, who does not even know that love is no longer in the fashion! By Saint Peter, Heaven will soon be out of the fashion too, and Messer Satanas will rake in the just and the unjust alike, so that

he need no longer fast on Fridays, having a more savoury larder! And no doubt some of you will say that hell is really so antiquated that it should be put in the museum at the University of Rome, for a curious old piece of theological furniture. Truth! it is a wonder it is not worn out with digesting the tough morsels it gets, when people like you are finally gotten rid of from this world! But it is made of good material, and will last, never fear! This is not the gospel of peace, but it is the gospel of truth.

Loving hearts and gentle souls shall rule the world some day, for all your pestiferous fashions; and old as I am,—I do not mean aged, but well on in years,—I believe in love still, and I always will. It is true that it was not given to me to love as Nino loves Hedwig, for Nino is even now a stronger, sterner man than I. His is the nature that can never do enough; his the hands that never tire for her; his the art that would surpass, for her, the stubborn bounds of possibility. He is never weary of striving to increase her joy of him. His philosophy is but that. No quibbles of "being" and "not being," or

wretched speculations concerning the object of existence; he has found the true unity of unities, and he holds it fast.

Meanwhile, you object that I am not proceeding with my task, and telling you more facts, recounting more conversations, and painting more descriptions. Believe me, this one fact, that to love well is to be all man can be, is greater than all the things men have ever learned and classified in dictionaries. It is, moreover, the only fact that has consistently withstood the ravages of time and social revolution; it is the wisdom that has opened, as by magic, the treasures of genius, of goodness, and of all greatness, for every one to see; it is the vital elixir that has made men of striplings, and giants of cripples, and heroes of the poor in heart though great in spirit. Nino is an example: for he was but a boy, yet he acted like a man; a gifted artist in a great city, courted by the noblest, yet he kept his faith.

But when I have taken breath I will tell you what he and Hedwig said to each other at the gate, and whether at the last she went with him, or stayed in dismal Fillettino for her father's sake.

CHAPTER X.

"LET us sit upon the step and talk," said Hedwig, gently disengaging herself from his arms.

"The hour is advancing, and it is damp here, my love. You will be cold," said Nino, protesting against delay as best he could.

"No; and I must talk to you." She sat down, but Nino pulled off his cloak and threw it round her. She motioned him to sit beside her, and raised the edge of the heavy mantle with her hand. "I think it is big enough," said she.

"I think so," returned Nino; and so the pair sat side by side and hand in hand, wrapped in the same garment, deep in the shadow of the rocky doorway. "You got my letter, dearest?" asked Nino, hoping to remind her of his proposal.

"Yes, it reached me safely. Tell me, Nino, have you thought of me in all this time?" she

asked, in her turn; and there was the joy of the answer already in the question.

"As the earth longs for the sun, my love, through all the dark night. You have never been out of my thoughts. You know that I went away to find you in Paris, and I went to London, too; and everywhere I sang to you, hoping you might be somewhere in the great audiences. But you never went to Paris at all. When I got Professor Grandi's letter saying that he had discovered you, I had but one night more to sing, and then I flew to you."

"And now you have found me," said Hedwig, looking lovingly up to him through the shadow.

"Yes, dear one; and I have come but just in time. You are in great trouble now, and I am here to save you from it all. Tell me, what is it all about?"

"Ah, Nino dear, it is very terrible. My father declared I must marry Baron Benoni, or end my days here, in this dismal castle." Nino ground his teeth, and drew her even closer to him, so that her head rested on his shoulder.

"Infamous wretch!" he muttered.

"Hush, Nino," said Hedwig, gently; "he is my father."

"Oh, I mean Benoni, of course," exclaimed Nino quickly.

"Yes, dear, of course you do," Hedwig responded. "But my father has changed his mind. He no longer wishes me to marry the Jew."

"Why is that, sweetheart?"

"Because Benoni was very rude to me to-day, and I told my father, who said he should leave the house at once."

"I hope he will kill the hound!" cried Nino, with rising anger. "And I am glad your father has still the decency to protect you from insult."

"My father is very unkind, Nino mio, but he is an officer and a gentleman."

"Oh, I know what that means,—a gentleman! Fie on your gentlemen! Do you love me less, Hedwig, because I am of the people?"

For all answer Hedwig threw her arms round his neck, passionately.

"Tell me, love, would you think better of me if I were noble?"

"Ah, Nino, how most unkind! Oh, no: I

love you, and for your sake I love the people,—the strong, brave people, whose man you are."

"God bless you, dear, for that," he answered tenderly. "But say, will your father take you back to Rome, now that he has sent away Benoni?"

"No, he will not. He swears that I shall stay here until I can forget you." The fair head rested again on his shoulder.

"It appears to me that your most high and noble father has amazingly done perjury in his oath," remarked Nino, resting his hand on her hair, from which the thick black veil that had muffled it had slipped back. "What do you think, love?"

"I do not know," replied Hedwig, in a low voice.

"Why, dear, you have only to close this door behind you, and you may laugh at your prison and your jailer!"

"Oh, I could not, Nino; and besides, I am weak, and cannot walk very far. And we should have to walk very far, you know."

"You, darling? Do you think I would not

and could not bear you from here to Rome in these arms?" As he spoke he lifted her bodily from the step.

"Oh!" she cried, half frightened, half thrilled, "how strong you are, Nino!"

"Not I; it is my love. But I have beasts close by, waiting even now; good stout mules, that will think you are only a little silver butterfly that has flitted down from the moon for them to carry."

"Have you done that, dear?" she asked, doubtfully, while her heart leaped at the thought. "But my father has horses," she added, on a sudden, in a very anxious voice.

"Never fear, my darling. No horse could scratch a foothold in the place where our mules are as safe as in a meadow. Come, dear heart, let us be going." But Hedwig hung her head, and did not stir. "What is it, Hedwig?" he asked, bending down to her and softly stroking her hair. "Are you afraid of me?"

"No,—oh, no! Not of you, Nino,—never of you!" She pushed her face close against him, very lovingly.

"What then, dear? Everything is ready for us. Why should we wait?"

"Is it quite right, Nino?"

"Ah, yes, love, it is right,—the rightest right that ever was! How can such love as ours be wrong? Have I not to-day implored your father to relent and let us marry? I met him in the road——"

"He told me, dear. It was brave of you. And he frightened me by making me think he had killed you. Oh, I was so frightened, you do not know!"

"Cruel——" Nino checked the rising epithet. "He is your father, dear, and I must not speak my mind. But since he will not let you go, what will you do? Will you cease to love me, at his orders?"

"Oh, Nino, never, never, never!"

"But will you stay here, to die of solitude and slow torture?" He pleaded passionately.

"I—I suppose so, Nino," she said, in a choking sob.

"Now, by Heaven, you shall not!" He clasped her in his arms, raising her suddenly to

her feet. Her head fell back upon his shoulder, and he could see her turn pale to the very lips, for his sight was softened to the gloom, and her eyes shone like stars of fire at him from beneath the half-closed lids. But the faint glory of coming happiness was already on her face, and he knew that the last fight was fought for love's mastery.

"Shall we ever part again, love?" he whispered, close to her. She shook her head, her starry eyes still fastened on his.

"Then come, my own dear one,—come," and he gently drew her with him. He glanced, naturally enough, at the step where they had sat, and something dark caught his eye just above it. Holding her hand in one of his, as though fearful lest she should escape him, he stooped quickly and snatched the thing from the stair with the other. It was Hedwig's little bundle.

"What have you here?" he asked. "Oh, Hedwig, you said you would not come?" he added, half laughing, as he discovered what it was.

"I was not sure that I should like you, Nino," she said, as he again put his arm about

her. Hedwig started violently. "What is that?" she exclaimed, in a terrified whisper.

"What, love?"

"The noise! Oh, Nino, there is some one on the staircase, coming down. Quick,—quick! Save me, for love's sake!"

But Nino had heard, too, the clumsy but rapid groping of heavy feet on the stairs above, far up in the winding stone steps, but momentarily coming nearer. Instantly he pushed Hedwig out to the street, tossing the bundle on the ground, withdrew the heavy key, shut the door, and double turned the lock from the outside, removing the key again at once. Nino is a man who acts suddenly and infallibly in great emergencies. He took Hedwig in his arms, and ran with her to where the mules were standing, twenty yards away.

The stout countryman from Subiaco, who had spent some years in breaking stones out of consideration for the government, as a general confession of the inaccuracy of his views regarding foreigners, was by no means astonished when he saw Nino appear with a woman in his

arms. Together they seated her on one of the mules, and ran beside her, for there was no time for Nino to mount. They had to pass the door, and through all its oaken thickness they could hear the curses and imprecations of some one inside, and the wood and iron shook with repeated blows and kicks. The quick-witted muleteer saw the bundle lying where Nino had tossed it, and he picked it up as he ran.

Both Nino and Hedwig recognised Benoni's voice, but neither spoke as they hurried up the street into the bright moonlight, she riding and Nino running as he led the other beast at a sharp trot. In five minutes they were out of the little town, and Nino, looking back, could see that the broad white way behind them was clear of all pursuers. Then he himself mounted, and the countryman trotted by his side.

Nino brought his mule close to Hedwig's. She was an accomplished horsewoman, and had no difficulty in accommodating herself to the rough country saddle. Their hands met, and the mules, long accustomed to each other's company, moved so evenly that the gentle bond was not

broken. But although Hedwig's fingers twined lovingly with his, and she often turned and looked at him from beneath her hanging veil, she was silent for a long time. Nino respected her mood, half guessing what she felt, and no sound was heard save an occasional grunt from the countryman as he urged the beasts, and the regular clatter of the hoofs on the stony road.

To tell the truth, Nino was overwhelmed with anxiety; for his quick wits had told him that Benoni, infuriated by the check he had received, would lose no time in remounting the stairs, saddling a horse, and following them. If only they could reach the steeper part of the ravine they could bid defiance to any horse that ever galloped, for Benoni must inevitably come to grief if he attempted a pursuit into the desolate Serra. He saw that Hedwig had not apprehended the danger, when once the baron was stopped by the door, conceiving in her heart the impression that he was a prisoner in his own trap. Nevertheless, they urged the beasts onward hotly, if one may use the word of the long, heavy trot of a mountain mule. The sturdy

countryman never paused or gasped for breath, keeping pace in a steady, determined fashion.

But they need not have been disturbed, for Hedwig's guess was nearer the truth than Nino's reasoning. They knew it later, when Temistocle found them in Rome, and I may as well tell you how it happened. When he reached the head of the staircase, he took the key from the one side to the other, locked the door, as agreed, and sat down to wait for Hedwig's rap. He indeed suspected that it would never come, for he had only pretended not to see the mules; but the prospect of further bribes made him anxious not to lose sight of his mistress, and certainly not to disobey her, in case she really returned. The staircase opened into the foot of the tower, a broad stone chamber, with unglazed windows.

Temistocle sat himself down to wait on an old bench that had been put there, and the light of the full moon made the place as bright as day. Now the lock on the door was rusty, like the one below, and creaked loudly every time it was turned. But Temistocle fancied it would not be heard in the great building, and felt quite safe.

Sitting there, he nodded and fell asleep, tired with the watching.

Benoni had probably passed a fiery half hour with the count. But I have no means of knowing what was said on either side; at all events, he was in the castle still, and, what is more, he was awake. When Hedwig opened the upper door and closed it behind her, the sound was distinctly audible to his quick ears, and he probably listened and speculated, and finally yielded to his curiosity.

However that may have been, he found Temistocle asleep in the tower basement, saw the key in the lock, guessed whence the noise had come, and turned it. The movement woke Temistocle, who started to his feet, and recognised the tall figure of the baron just entering the door. Too much confused for reflection, he called aloud, and the baron disappeared down the stairs. Temistocle listened at the top, heard distinctly the shutting and locking of the lower door, and a moment afterwards Benoni's voice, swearing in every language at once, came echoing up.

"They have escaped," said Temistocle to himself. "If I am not mistaken, I had better do the same." With that he locked the upper door, put the key in his pocket, and departed on tiptoe. Having his hat and his overcoat with him, and his money in his pocket, he determined to leave the baron shut up in the staircase. He softly left the castle by the front gate, of which he knew the tricks, and he was not heard of for several weeks afterwards. As for Benoni, he was completely caught, and probably spent the remainder of the night in trying to wake the inmates of the building. So you see that Nino need not have been so much disturbed after all.

While these things were happening Nino and Hedwig got fairly away, and no one but a mountaineer of the district could possibly have overtaken them. Just as they reached the place where the valley suddenly narrows to a gorge, the countryman spoke. It was the first word that had been uttered by any of the party in an hour, so great had been their haste and anxiety.

"I see a man with a beast," he said, shortly.

"So do I," answered Nino. "I expect to

meet a friend here." Then he turned to Hedwig. "Dear one," he said, "we are to have a companion now, who says he is a very proper person."

"A companion?" repeated Hedwig, anxiously.

"Yes. We are to have the society of no less a person than the Professor Cornelio Grandi, of the University of Rome. He will go with us, and be a witness."

"Yes," said Hedwig, expecting more, "a witness——"

"A witness of our marriage, dear lady; I trust to-morrow,—or to-day, since midnight is past." He leaned far over his saddle-bow, as the mules clambered up the rough place. Her hand went out to him, and he took it. They were so near that I could see them. He dropped the reins and bared his head, and so, riding, he bent himself still further, and pressed his lips upon her hand: and that was all the marriage contract that was sealed between them. But it was enough.

There I sat, upon a stone in the moonlight, just below the trees, waiting for them. And

there I had been for two mortal hours and more, left to meditate upon the follies of professors in general and of myself in particular. I was beginning to wonder whether Nino would come at all, and I can tell you I was glad to see the little caravan. Ugh! it is an ugly place to be alone in!

They rode up, and I went forward to meet them.

"Nino mio," said I, "you have made me pass a terrible time here. Thank Heaven, you are come; and the contessina, too! Your most humble servant, signorina." I bowed low and Hedwig bent a little forward, but the moon was just behind her, and I could not see her face.

"I did not think we should meet so soon, Signor Grandi. But I am very glad." There was a sweet shyness in the little speech that touched me. I am sure she was afraid that it was not yet quite right, or at least that there should be some other lady in the party.

"Courage, Messer Cornelio," said Nino. "Mount your donkey, and let us be on our way."

"Is not the contessina tired?" I inquired. "You might surely rest a little here."

"Caro mio," answered Nino, "we must be safe at the top of the pass before we rest. We were so unfortunate as to wake his excellency the Baron Benoni out of some sweet dream or other, and perhaps he is not far behind us."

An encounter with the furious Jew was not precisely attractive to me, and I was on my donkey before you could count a score. I suggested to Nino that it would be wiser if the countryman led the way through the woods, and I followed him. Then the contessina would be behind me, and Nino would bring up the rear. It occurred to me that the mules might outstrip my donkey if I went last, and so I might be left to face the attack, if any came; whereas, if I were in front, the others could not go any faster than I.

CHAPTER XI.

THE gorge rises steep and precipitous between the lofty mountains on both sides, and it is fortunate that we had some light from the moon, which was still high at two o'clock, being at the full.

It is a ghastly place enough. In the days of the Papal States the Serra di Sant' Antonio, as it is called, was the shortest passage to the kingdom of Naples, and the frontier line ran across its summit. To pass from one dominion to the other it would be necessary to go out of the way some forty or fifty miles, perhaps, unless one took this route; and the natural consequence was that outlaws, smugglers, political fugitives, and all such manner of men found it a great convenience. Soldiers were stationed in Filettino and on the other side, to check illicit traffic

and brigandage, and many were the fights that were fought among these giant beeches.

The trees are of primeval dimensions, for no one has yet been enterprising enough to attempt to fell the timber. The gorge is so steep, and in many places so abruptly precipitous, that the logs could never be removed; and so they have grown undisturbed for hundreds of years, rotting and falling away as they stand. The beech is a lordly tree, with its great smooth trunk and its spreading branches, and though it never reaches the size of the chestnut, it is far more beautiful and long-lived.

Here and there, at every hundred yards or so, it seemed to me, the countryman would touch his hat and cross himself as he clambered up the rocky path, and then I did likewise; for there was always some rude cross or rough attempt at the inscription of a name at such spots, which marked where a man had met his untimely end. Sometimes the moonbeams struggled through the branches, still bare of leaves, and fell on a few bold initials and a date; and sometimes we came to a broad ledge where no trees were, but only a

couple of black sticks tied at right angles for a cross. It was a dismal place, and the owls hooted at us.

Besides, it grew intensely cold towards morning, so that the countryman wanted to stop and make a fire to warm ourselves. Though it was the end of March, the ground was frozen as hard as any stone wherever it was free from rocks. But Nino dismounted, and insisted upon wrapping his cloak about Hedwig; and then he walked, for fear of catching cold, and the countryman mounted his mule and clambered away in front. In this way Hedwig and Nino lagged behind, conversing in low tones that sounded very soft; and when I looked round, I could see how he held his hand on her saddle and supported her in the rough places. Poor child, who would have thought she could bear such terrible work! But she had the blood of a soldierly old race in her veins, and would have struggled on silently till she died.

I think it would be useless to describe every stone on the desolate journey, but when the morning dawned we were at the top, and we

found the descent much easier. The rosy streaks came first, quite suddenly, and in a few minutes the sun was up, and the eventful night was past. I was never so glad to get rid of a night in my life. It is fortunate that I am so thin and light, for I could never have reached the highroad alive had I been as fat as De Pretis is; and certainly the little donkey would have died by the way. He was quite as thin when I sold him again as when I bought him, a fortnight before, in spite of the bread I had given him.

Hedwig drew her veil close about her face as the daylight broke, for she would not let Nino see how pale and tired she was. But when at last we were in the broad, fertile valley which marks the beginning of the old kingdom of Naples, we reached a village where there was an inn, and Nino turned every one out of the best room with a high hand, and had a couch of some sort spread for Hedwig. He himself walked up and down outside the door for five whole hours, lest she should be disturbed in her sleep. As for me, I lay on a bench, rolled in my cloak, and slept as I have not slept since I was twenty.

Nino knew that the danger of pursuit was past now, and that the first thing necessary was to give Hedwig rest; for she was so tired that she could not eat, though there were very good eggs to be had, of which I ate three, and drank some wine, which does not compare to that on the Roman side.

The sturdy man from Subiaco seemed like iron, for he ate sparingly and drank less, and went out into the village to secure a conveyance and to inquire the nearest way to Ceprano.

But when, as I have said, Nino had guarded Hedwig's door for five hours he woke me from my sleep, and by that time it was about two in the afternoon.

"Hi, Messer Cornelio! wake up!" he cried, pulling my arm. And I rubbed my eyes.

"What do you want, Nino?" I inquired.

"I want to be married immediately," he replied, still pulling at my elbow.

"Well, pumpkin-head," I said angrily, "marry, then, in Heaven's name, and let me sleep! I do not want to marry anybody."

"But I do," retorted Nino, sitting down on

the bench and laying a hand on my shoulder. He could still see Hedwig's door from where he sat.

"In this place?" I asked. "Are you serious?"

"Perfectly. This is a town of some size, and there must be a mayor here who marries people when they take the fancy."

"Diavolo! I suppose so," I assented.

"A sindaco,—there must be one, surely."

"Very well, go and find him, good-for-nothing!" I exclaimed.

"But I cannot go away and leave that door until she wakes," he objected. "Dear Messer Cornelio, you have done so much for me, and are so kind,—will you not go out and find the sindaco, and bring him here to marry us?"

"Nino," I said, gravely, "the ass is a patient beast, and very intelligent, but there is a limit to his capabilities. So long as it is merely a question of doing things you cannot do, very well. But if it comes to this, that I must find not only the bride, but also the mayor and the priest, I say, with good Pius IX.,—rest his soul, —*non possumus.*" Nino laughed. He could afford to laugh now.

"Messer Cornelio, a child could tell you have been asleep. I never heard such a string of disconnected sentences in my life. Come, be kind, and get me a mayor that I may be married."

"I tell you I will not," I cried, stubbornly. "Go yourself."

"But I cannot leave the door. If anything should happen to her——"

"Macchè! What should happen to her, pray? I will put my bench across the door, and sit there till you come back."

"I am not quite sure——" he began.

"Idiot!" I exclaimed.

"Well, let us see how it looks." And with that he ousted me from my bench, and carried it, walking on tiptoe, to the entrance of Hedwig's room. Then he placed it across the door. "Now sit down," he said, authoritatively, but in a whisper; and I took my place in the middle of the long seat. He stood back and looked at me with an artistic squint.

"You look so proper," he said, "that I am sure nobody will think of trying the door while you sit there. Will you remain till I come back?"

"Like Saint Peter in his chair," I whispered, for I wanted to get rid of him.

"Well, then, I must risk whatever may happen, and leave you here." So he went away. Now I ask you if this was not a ridiculous position. But I had discovered, in the course of my fortnight's wanderings, that I was really something of a philosopher in practice, and I am proud to say that on this occasion I smoked in absolute indifference to the absurdity of the thing. People came and stood at a distance in the passage, and eyed me curiously. But they knew I belonged to the party of foreigners, and doubtless they supposed it was the custom of my country to guard doors in that way.

An hour passed, and I heard Hedwig stirring in the room. After a time she came close to the door and put her hand on the lock, so that it began to rattle; but she hesitated, and went away again. I once more heard her moving about. Then I heard her open the window, and at last she came boldly and opened the door, which turned inward. I sat like a rock, not knowing whether Nino would like me to turn round and look.

"Signor Grandi!" she cried at last in laughing tones.

"Yes, signorina!" I replied, respectfully, without moving. She hesitated.

"What are you doing in that strange position?" she asked.

"I am mounting guard," I answered. "I promised Nino that I would sit here till he came back." She fairly laughed now, and it was the most airy, silvery laugh in the world.

"But why do you not look at me?"

"I am not sure that Nino would let me," said I. "I promised not to move, and I will keep my promise."

"Will you let me out?" she asked, struggling with her merriment.

"By no means," I answered; "any more than I would let anybody in."

"Then we must make the best of it," said she. "But I will bring a chair and sit down, while you tell me the news."

"Will you assume all responsibility toward Nino, signorina, if I turn so that I can see you?" I asked, as she sat down.

"I will say that I positively ordered you to do so," she answered, gaily. "Now look, and tell me where Signor Cardegna is gone."

I looked indeed, and it was long before I looked away. The rest, the freedom, and the happiness had done their work quickly, in spite of all the dreadful anxiety and fatigue. The fresh, transparent colour was in her cheeks, and her blue eyes were clear and bright. The statue had been through the fire, and was made a living thing, beautiful, and breathing, and real.

"Tell me," she said, the light dancing in her eyes, "where is he gone?"

"He is gone to find the mayor of this imposing capital," I replied. Hedwig suddenly blushed, and turned her glistening eyes away. She was beautiful so.

"Are you very tired, signorina? I ought not to ask the question, for you look as though you had never been tired in your life."

There is no saying what foolish speeches I might have made had not Nino returned. He was radiant, and I anticipated that he must have succeeded in his errand.

"Ha! Messer Cornelio, is this the way you keep watch?" he cried.

"I found him here," said Hedwig, shyly, "and he would not even glance at me until I positively insisted upon it." Nino laughed, as he would have laughed at most things in that moment, for sheer superfluity of happiness.

"Signorina," he said, "would it be agreeable to you to walk for a few minutes after your sleep? The weather is wonderfully fine, and I am sure you owe it to the world to show the roses which rest has given you."

Hedwig blushed softly, and I rose and went away, conceiving that I had kept watch long enough. But Nino called after me, as he moved the bench from the door.

"Messer Cornelio, will you not come with us? Surely you need a walk very much, and we can ill spare your company. My lady, let me offer you my arm."

In this manner we left the inn, a wedding procession which could not have been much smaller, and the singing of an old woman, who sat with her distaff in front of her house, was

the wedding march. Nino seemed in no great haste, I thought, and I let them walk as they would, while I kept soberly in the middle of the road, a little way behind.

It was not far that we had to go, however, and soon we came to a large brick house, with an uncommonly small door, over which hung a wooden shield with the arms of Italy brightly painted in green and red and white.

Nino and Hedwig entered arm in arm, and I slunk guiltily in after them. Hedwig had drawn her veil, which was the only head-dress she had, close about her face.

In a quarter of an hour the little ceremony was over, and the registers were signed by us all. Nino also got a stamped certificate, which he put very carefully in his pocket-book. I never knew what it cost Nino to overcome the scruples of the sindaco about marrying a strange couple from Rome in that outlandish place, where the peasants stared at us as though we had been the most unnatural curiosities, and even the pigs in the street jogged sullenly out of our way, as though not recognising that we were human.

At all events, the thing was done, and Hedwig von Lira became for the rest of her life Edvigia Cardegna. And I felt very guilty. The pair went down the steps of the house together in front of me, and stopped as they reached the street; forgetting my presence, I presume. They had not forgotten me so long as I was needed to be of use to them; but I must not complain.

"We can face the world together now, my dear lady," said Nino, as he drew her little hand through his arm. She looked up at him, and I could see her side face. I shall never forget the expression. There was in it something I really never saw before, which made me feel as though I were in church; and I knew then that there was no wrong in helping such love as that to its fulfilment.

By the activity of the man from Subiaco a curious conveyance was ready for us, being something between a gig and a cart, and a couple of strong horses were hired for the long drive. The countryman, who had grown rich in the last three days, offered to buy the thin little ass which had carried me so far and so well. He observed that

he was blind of one eye, which I had never found out, and I do not believe it was true. The way he showed it was by snapping his fingers close to the eye in question. The donkey winked, and the countryman said that if the eye were good the beast would see that the noise was made by the fingers, and would not be frightened, and would therefore not wink.

"You see," said he, "he thinks it is a whip cracking, and so he is afraid."

"Do donkeys always wink when they are frightened?" I inquired. "It is very interesting."

"Yes," said the countryman, "they mostly do." At all events, I was obliged to take the man's own price, which was little enough,—not a third of what I had given.

The roads were good, and the long and the short of the matter, without any more details, is that we reached Rome very early the next morning, having caught the night train from Naples. Hedwig slept most of the time in the carriage and all the time in the train, while Nino, who seemed never to tire or to need sleep, sat watching her with wide, happy eyes. But perhaps he

slept a little too, for I did, and I cannot answer for his wakefulness through every minute of the night.

Once I asked him what he intended to do in Rome.

"We will go to the hotel Costanzi," he answered, "which is a foreigners' resort. And if she is rested enough we will come down to you, and see what we can do about being married properly in church by the old curato."

"The marriage by the sindaco is perfectly legal," I remarked.

"It is a legal contract, but it is not a marriage that pleases me," he said, gravely.

"But, caro mio, without offence, your bride is a Protestant, a Lutheran; not to mince matters, a heretic. They will make objections."

"She is an angel," said Nino, with great conviction.

"But the angels neither marry nor are given in marriage," I objected, arguing the point to pass the time.

"What do you make of it, then, Messer Cornelio?" he asked, with a smile.

"Why, as a heretic she ought to burn, and as an angel she ought not to marry."

"It is better to marry than to burn," retorted Nino, triumphantly.

"Diavolo! Have you had Saint Paul for a tutor?" I asked, for I knew the quotation, being fond of Greek.

"I heard a preacher cite it once at the Gesù, and I thought it a good saying."

Early in the morning we rolled into the great station of Rome, and took an affectionate leave of each other, with the promise that Hedwig and Nino would visit me in the course of the day. I saw them into a carriage, with Nino's small portmanteau and Hedwig's bundle, and then mounted a modest omnibus that runs from the Termini to St. Peter's, and goes very near my house.

All the bells were ringing gladly, as if to welcome us, for it was Easter morning; and though it is not so kept as it used to be, it is nevertheless a great feast. Besides, the spring was at hand, and the acacia-trees in the great square were budding, though everything was still so backward in the hills. April was at hand, which the

foreigners think is our best month; but I prefer June and July, when the weather is warm, and the music plays in the Piazza Colonna of an evening. For all that, April is a glad time, after the disagreeable winter.

There was with me much peace on that Easter day, for I felt that my dear boy was safe after all his troubles. At least, he was safe from anything that could be done to part him from Hedwig; for the civil laws are binding, and Hedwig was of the age when a young woman is legally free to marry whom she pleases. Of course old Lira might still make himself disagreeable, but I fancied him too much a man of the world to desire a scandal, when no good could follow. The one shadow in the future was the anger of Benoni, who would be certain to seek some kind of revenge for the repulse he had suffered. I was still ignorant of his whereabouts, not yet knowing what I knew long afterwards, and have told you, because otherwise you would have been as much in the dark as he was himself, when Temistocle cunningly turned the lock of the staircase door and left him to his curses and his meditations. I

have had much secret joy in thinking what a wretched night he must have passed there, and how his long limbs must have ached with sitting about on the stones, and how hoarse he must have been from the dampness and the swearing.

I reached home, the dear old number twenty-seven in Santa Catarina dei Funari, by half past seven, or even earlier; and I was glad when I rang the bell on the landing, and called through the keyhole in my impatience.

"Mariuccia, Mariuccia, come quickly! It is I!" I cried.

"O Madonna mia!" I heard her exclaim, and there was a tremendous clatter, as she dropped the coffee-pot. She was doubtless brewing herself a quiet cup with my best Porto-Rico, which I do not allow her to use. She thought I was never coming back, the cunning old hag!

"Dio mio, Signor Professore! A good Easter to you!" she cried, as I heard the flat pattering of her old feet inside, running to the door. "I thought the wolves had eaten you, padrone mio!" And at last she let me in.

CHAPTER XII.

"A TALL gentleman came here late last night, Signor Professore," said Mariuccia, as I sat down in the old green arm-chair. "He seemed very angry about something, and said he must positively see you." The idea of Benoni flashed uneasily across my brain.

"Was he the grave signore who came a few days before I left?" I asked.

"Heaven preserve us!" ejaculated Mariuccia. "This one was much older, and seemed to be lame; for when he tried to shake his stick at me, he could not stand without it. He looked like one of the old Swiss guards at Palazzo." By which she meant the Vatican, as you know.

"It must have been the count," I said, thinking aloud.

"A count! A pretty sort of count, indeed, to come waking people from their beds in the night! He had not even a high hat like the one you wear when you go to the University. A count, indeed!"

"Go and make me some good coffee, Mariuccia," I said, eying her severely to show I suspected her of having used mine; "and be careful to make it of my best Porto-Rico, if you have any left, without any chicory."

"A count, indeed!" she muttered angrily as she hobbled away, not in the least heeding my last remark, which I believed to be withering.

I had not much time for reflection that morning. My old clothes were in tatters, and the others looked very fine by contrast, so that when I had made my toilet I felt better able to show myself to the distinguished company I expected. I had seen so much extraordinary endurance in Nino and Hedwig during the last two or three days that I was prepared to see them appear at any moment, brushed and curled and ready for anything. The visit of the count, however, had seriously disturbed me, and I hardly knew what

to look for from him. As it turned out, I had not long to wait.

I was resting myself in the arm-chair, and smoking one of those infamous cigars that nearly suffocate me, just for company, and I was composing in my mind a letter to the authorities of the University, requesting that I might begin to lecture again. I did not find out until later that I need not have written to them at all when I went away, as ten days are always allowed at Easter, in any case. It is just like my forgetfulness, to have made such a mistake. I really only missed four lectures. But my composition was interrupted by the door-bell, and my heart sank in my breast. Mariuccia opened, and I knew by the sound of the stick on the bricks that the lame count had come to wreak his vengeance.

Being much frightened, I was very polite, and bowed a great many times as he came toward me. It was he, looking much the same as ever, wooden and grizzly.

"I am much honoured, sir," I began, "by seeing you here."

"You are Signor Grandi?" he inquired, with a stiff bow.

"The same, Signor Conte, and very much at your service," I answered, rubbing my hands together to give myself an air of satisfaction.

"Let us not waste time," he said, severely, but not roughly. "I have come to you on business. My daughter has disappeared with your son, or whatever relation the Signor Giovanni Cardegna is to you."

"He is no relation, Signor Conte. He was an orphan, and I——"

"It is the same," he interrupted. "You are responsible for his doings."

I responsible! Good heavens, had I not done all in my power to prevent the rashness of that hot-headed boy?

"Will you not sit down, sir?" I said, moving a chair for him. He took the seat rather reluctantly.

"You do not seem much astonished at what I tell you," he remarked. "It is evident that you are in the plot."

"Unless you will inform me of what you

know, Signor Conte," I replied with urbanity, "I cannot see how I can be of service to you."

"On the contrary," said he, "I am the person to ask questions. I wake up in the morning and find my daughter gone. I naturally inquire where she is."

"Most naturally, as you say, sir. I would do the same."

"And you, also very naturally, answer my questions," he continued severely.

"In that case, sir," I replied, "I would call to your attention the fact that you have asked but one question,—whether I were Signor Grandi. I answered that in the affirmative." You see I was apprehensive of what he might do, and desired to gain time. But he began to lose his temper.

"I have no patience with you Italians," he said, gruffly; "you bandy words and play with them as if you enjoyed it."

Diavolo, thought I, he is angry at my silence. What will he be if I speak?

"What do you wish to know, Signor Conte?" I inquired, in suave tones.

"I wish to know where my daughter is. Where

is she? Do you understand? I am asking a question now, and you cannot deny it."

I was sitting in front of him, but I rose and pretended to shut the door, thus putting the table and the end of the piano between us, before I answered.

"She is in Rome, Signor Conte," I said.

"With Cardegna?" he asked, not betraying any emotion.

"Yes."

"Very well. I will have them arrested at once. That is all I wanted." He put his crutch stick to the floor as though about to rise. Seeing that his anger was not turned against me, I grew bold.

"You had better not do that," I mildly observed, across the table.

"And why not, sir?" he asked, quickly, hesitating whether to get upon his feet or to remain seated.

"Because they are married already," I answered, retreating toward the door. But there was no need for flight. He sank back in the chair, and the stick fell from his hands upon

the bricks with a loud rattle. Poor old man! I thought he was quite overcome by the news I had communicated. He sat staring at the window, his hands lying idly on his knees. I moved to come toward him, but he raised one hand and began to twirl his great gray moustache fiercely; whereat I resumed my former position of safety.

"How do you know this?" he demanded on a sudden.

"I was present at the civil marriage yesterday," I answered, feeling very much scared. He began to notice my manœuvre.

"You need not be so frightened," he said, coldly. "It would be no use to kill any of you now, though I would like to."

"I assure you that no one ever frightened me in my own house, sir," I answered. I think my voice must have sounded very bold, for he did not laugh at me.

"I suppose it is irrevocable," he said, as if to himself.

"Oh, yes—perfectly irrevocable," I answered, promptly. "They are married, and have come back to Rome. They are at the Hotel Costanzi.

I am sure that Nino would give you every explanation."

"Who is Nino?" he asked.

"Nino Cardegna, of course——"

"And do you foolishly imagine that I am going to ask him to explain why he took upon himself to carry away my daughter?" The question was scornful enough.

"Signor Conte," I protested, "you would do well to see them, for she is your daughter, after all."

"She is not my daughter any longer," growled the count. "She is married to a singer, a tenor, an Italian with curls and lies and grins, as you all have. Fie!" And he pulled his moustache again.

"A singer," said I, "if you like, but a great singer, and an honest man."

"Oh, I did not come here to listen to your praises of that scoundrel!" he exclaimed, hotly. "I have seen enough of him to be sick of him."

"I wish he were in this room to hear you call him by such names," I said; for I began to grow

angry, as I sometimes do, and then my fear grows small and my heart grows big.

"Ah!" said he, ironically. "And pray, what would he do to me?"

"He would probably ask you again for that pistol you refused to lend him the other day." I thought I might as well show that I knew all about the meeting in the road. But Lira laughed grimly, and the idea of a fight seemed to please him.

"I would not refuse it this time. In fact, since you mention it, I think I will go and offer it to him now. Do you think I should be justified, Master Censor?"

"No," said I, coming forward and facing him. "But if you like you can fight me. I am your own age, and a better match." I would have fought him then and there, with the chairs, if he had liked.

"Why should I fight you?" he inquired, in some astonishment. "You strike me as a very peaceable person indeed."

"Diavolo! do you expect me to stand quietly and hear you call my boy a scoundrel? What

do you take me for, signore? Do you know that I am the last of the Conti Grandi, and as noble as any of you, and as fit to fight, though my hair is gray?"

"I knew, indeed, that one member of that illustrious family survived in Rome," he answered, gravely, "but I was not aware that you were he. I am glad to make your acquaintance, and I sincerely wish that you were the father of the young man who has married my daughter. If you were, I would be ready to arrange matters." He looked at me searchingly.

"Unfortunately, I am not any relation of his," I answered. "His father and mother were peasants on my estate of Serveti, when it still was mine. They died when he was a baby, and I took care of him and educated him."

"Yes, he is well educated," reflected the count, "for I examined him myself. Let us talk no more about fighting. You are quite sure that the marriage is legal?"

"Quite certain. You can do nothing, and any attempt would be a useless scandal. Besides, they are so happy, you do not know."

"So happy, are they? Do you think I am happy too?"

"A man has every reason to be so, when his daughter marries an honest man. It is a piece of good luck that does not happen often."

"Probably from the scarcity of daughters who are willing to drive their fathers to distraction by their disobedience and contempt of authority," he said, savagely.

"No,—from the scarcity of honest men," I said. "Nino is a very honest man. You may go from one end of Italy to the other and not meet one like him."

"I sincerely hope so," growled Lira. "Otherwise Italy would be as wholly unredeemed and unredeemable as you pretend that some parts of it are now. But I will tell you, Conte Grandi, you cannot walk across the street, in my country, without meeting a dozen men who would tremble at the idea of such depravity as an elopement."

"Our ideas of honesty differ, sir," I replied. "When a man loves a woman, I consider it honest in him to act as though he did, and not to go and marry another for consolation, beating her with a

thick stick whenever he chances to think of the first. That seems to be the northern idea of domestic felicity." Lira laughed gruffly, supposing that my picture was meant for a jest. "I am glad you are amused," I added.

"Upon my honour, sir," he replied, "you are so vastly amusing that I am half inclined to forgive my daughter's rashness, for the sake of enjoying your company. First you entrench yourself behind your furniture; then you propose to fight me; and now you give me the most original views upon love and marriage that I ever heard. Indeed, I have cause to be amused."

"I am happy to oblige you," I said, tartly, for I did not like his laughter. "So long as you confine your amusement to me, I am satisfied; but pray avoid using any objectionable language about Nino."

"Then my only course is to avoid the subject?"

"Precisely," I replied, with a good deal of dignity.

"In that case I will go," he said. I was immensely relieved, for his presence was most unpleasant, as you may readily guess. He got upon

his feet, and I showed him to the door, with all courtesy. I expected that he would say something about the future before leaving me, but I was mistaken. He bowed in silence, and stumped down the steps with his stick.

I sank into my arm-chair with a great sigh of relief, for I felt that, for me at least, the worst was over. I had faced the infuriated father, and I might now face anybody with the consciousness of power. I always feel conscious of great power when the danger is past. Once more I lit my cigar, and stretched myself out to take some rest. The constant strain on the nerves was becoming very wearing, and I knew very well that on the morrow I should need bleeding and mallows tea. Hardly was I settled and comfortable when I heard that dreadful bell again.

"This is the day of the resurrection indeed," cried Mariuccia frantically from the kitchen. And she hurried to the door. But I cannot describe to you the screams of joy and the strange sounds, between laughing and crying, that her leathern throat produced when she found Nino and Hedwig on the landing, waiting for admission. And

when Nino explained that he had been married, and that this beautiful lady with the bright eyes and the golden hair was his wife, the old woman fairly gave way, and sat upon a chair in an agony of amazement and admiration. But the pair came toward me, and I met them with a light heart.

"Nino," said Hedwig, "we have not been nearly grateful enough to Signor Grandi for all he has done. I have been very selfish," she said, penitently, turning to me.

"Ah no, signora," I replied,—for she was married now, and no longer "signorina,"—"it is never selfish of such as you to let an old man do you service. You have made me very happy." And then I embraced Nino, and Hedwig gave me her hand, which I kissed in the old fashion.

"And so this is your old home, Nino?" said Hedwig presently, looking about her, and touching the things in the room, as a woman will when she makes acquaintance with a place she has often heard of. "What a dear room it is! I wish we could live here!" How very soon a woman learns that "we" that means so much! It is

never forgotten, even when the love that bred it is dead and cold.

"Yes," I said, for Nino seemed so enraptured, as he watched her, that he could not speak. "And there is the old piano, with the end on the boxes because it has no leg, as I dare say Nino has often told you."

"Nino said it was a very good piano," said she.

"And indeed it is," he said, with enthusiasm. "It is out of tune now, perhaps, but it is the source of all my fortune." He leaned over the crazy instrument and seemed to caress it.

"Poor old thing!" said Hedwig, compassionately. "I am sure there is music in it still—the sweet music of the past."

"Yes," said he, laughing, "it must be the music of the past, for it would not stand the 'music of the future,' as they call it, for five minutes. All the strings would break." Hedwig sat down on the chair that was in front of it, and her fingers went involuntarily to the keys, though she is no great musician.

"I can play a little, you know, Nino," she said shyly, and looked up to his face for a response,

not venturing to strike the chords. And it would have done you good to see how brightly Nino smiled and encouraged her little offer of music—he, the great artist, in whose life music was both sword and sceptre. But he knew that she had greatness also of a different kind, and he loved the small jewels in his crown as well as the glorious treasures of its larger wealth.

"Play to me, my love," he said, not caring now whether I heard the sweet words or not. She blushed a little, nevertheless, and glanced at me; then her fingers strayed over the keys, and drew out music that was very soft and yet very gay. Suddenly she ceased, and leaned forward on the desk of the piano, looking at him.

"Do you know, Nino, it was once my dream to be a great musician. If I had not been so rich I should have taken the profession in earnest. But now, you see, it is different, is it not?"

"Yes, it is all different now," he answered, not knowing exactly what she meant, but radiantly happy, all the same.

"I mean," she said, hesitating—"I mean that now that we are to be always together, what you

do I do, and what I do you do. Do you understand?"

"Yes, perfectly," said Nino, rather puzzled, but quite satisfied.

"Ah no, dear," said she, forgetting my presence, and letting her hand steal into his as he stood, "you do not understand—quite. I mean that so long as one of us can be a great musician it is enough, and I am just as great as though I did it all myself."

Thereupon Nino forgot himself altogether, and kissed her golden hair. But then he saw me looking, for it was so pretty a sight that I could not help it, and he remembered.

"Oh!" he said, in a tone of embarrassment that I had never heard before. Then Hedwig blushed very much too, and looked away, and Nino put himself between her and me, so that I might not see her.

"Could you play something for me to sing, Hedwig?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, yes! I can play 'Spirto gentil,' by heart," she cried, hailing the idea with delight.

In a moment they were both lost, and indeed

so was I, in the dignity and beauty of the simple melody. As she began to sing, Nino bent down to her, and almost whispered the first words into her ear. But soon he stood erect, and let the music flow from his lips, just as God made it. His voice was tired with the long watching and the dust and cold and heat of the journey; but, as De Pretis said when he began, he has an iron throat, and the weariness only made the tones soft and tender and thrilling, that would perhaps have been too strong for my little room.

Suddenly he stopped short in the middle of a note, and gazed open-mouthed at the door. And I looked too, and was horrified; and Hedwig, looking also, screamed and sprang back to the window, overturning the chair she had sat on.

In the doorway stood Ahasuerus Benoni, the Jew.

Mariuccia had imprudently forgotten to shut the door when Hedwig and Nino came, and the baron had walked in unannounced. You may imagine the fright I was in. But, after all, it was natural enough that after what had occurred

he, as well as the count, should seek an interview with me, to obtain what information I was willing to give.

There he stood in his gay clothes, tall and thin and smiling as of yore.

CHAPTER XIII.

NINO is a man for great emergencies, as I have had occasion to say, and when he realised who the unwelcome visitor was, he acted as promptly as usual. With a face like marble he walked straight across the room to Benoni and faced him.

"Baron Benoni," he said, in a low voice, "I warn you that you are most unwelcome here. If you attempt to say any word to my wife, or to force an entrance, I will make short work of you." Benoni eyed him with a sort of pitying curiosity as he made this speech :—

"Do not fear, Signor Cardegna. I came to see Signor Grandi, and to ascertain from him precisely what you have volunteered to tell me. You cannot suppose that I have any object in interrupting the leisure of a great artist, or the

privacy of his very felicitous domestic relations. I have not a great deal to say. That is, I have always a great deal to say about everything, but I shall at present confine myself to a very little."

"You will be wise," said Nino, scornfully, "and you would be wiser if you confined yourself to nothing at all."

"Patience, Signor Cardegna," protested Benoni. "You will readily conceive that I am a little out of breath with the stairs, for I am a very old man."

"In that case," I said, from the other side of the room, "I may as well occupy your breathing time by telling you that any remarks you are likely to make to me have been forestalled by the Graf von Lira, who has been with me this morning." Benoni smiled, but both Hedwig and Nino looked at me in surprise.

"I only wished to say," returned Benoni, "that I consider you in the light of an interesting phenomenon. Nay, Signor Cardegna, do not look so fierce. I am an old man——"

"An old devil," said Nino, hotly.

"An old fool," said I.

"An old reprobate," said Hedwig, from her corner, in deepest indignation.

"Precisely," returned Benoni, smilingly. "Many people have been good enough to tell me so before. Thanks, kind friends, I believe you with all my heart. Meanwhile, man, devil, fool, or reprobate, I am very old. I am about to leave Rome for St. Petersburg, and I will take this last opportunity of informing you that in a very singularly long life I have met with only two or three such remarkable instances as this of yours."

"Say what you wish to say, and go," said Nino, roughly.

"Certainly. And whenever I have met with such an instance I have done my very utmost to reduce it to the common level, and to prove to myself that no such thing really exists. I find it a dangerous thing, however; for an old man in love is likely to exhibit precisely the agreeable and striking peculiarities you have so aptly designated." There was something so odd about his manner and about the things he said that Nino was silent, and allowed him to proceed.

"The fact is," he continued, "that love is a very rare thing, nowadays, and is so very generally an abominable sham that I have often amused myself by diabolically devising plans for its destruction. On this occasion I very nearly came to grief myself. The same thing happened to me some time ago,—about forty years, I should say,—and I perceive that it has not been forgotten. It may amuse you to look at this paper, which I chance to have with me. Good-morning. I leave for St. Petersburg at once."

"I believe you are really the Wandering Jew!" cried Nino, as Benoni left the room.

"His name was certainly Ahasuerus," Benoni replied from the outer door. "But it may be a coincidence, after all. Good-by." He was gone.

I was the first to take up the paper he had thrown upon a chair. There was a passage marked with a red pencil. I read it aloud:—

". . . Baron Benoni, the wealthy banker of St. Petersburg, who was many years ago an inmate of a private lunatic asylum in Paris, is reported to be dangerously insane in Rome." That was all. The paper was the *Paris Figaro*.

"Merciful Heavens!" exclaimed Hedwig, "and I was shut up with that madman in Fillettino!" Nino was already by her side, and in his strong arms she forgot Benoni, and Fillettino, and all her troubles. We were all silent for some time. At last Nino spoke.

"Is it true that the count was here this morning?" he asked, in a subdued voice, for the extraordinary visit and its sequel had made him grave.

"Quite true," I said. "He was here a long time. I would not spoil your pleasure by telling you of it, when you first came."

"What did he—what did my father say?" asked Hedwig, presently.

"My dear children," I answered, thinking I might well call them so, "he said a great many unpleasant things, so that I offered to fight him if he said any more." At this they both laid hold of me and began to caress me; and one smoothed my hair, and the other embraced me, so that I was half smothered.

"Dear Signor Grandi," cried Hedwig, anxiously, "how good and brave you are!" She does not

know what a coward I am, you see, and I hope she will never find out, for nothing was ever said to me that gave me half so much pleasure as to be called brave by her, the dear child; and if she never finds out she may say it again, some day. Besides, I really did offer to fight Lira, as I have told you.

"And what is he going to do?" asked Nino, in some anxiety.

"I do not know. I told him it was all legal, and that he could not touch you at all. I also said you were staying at the Hotel Costanzi, where he might find you if he wished."

"Oh! Did you tell him that?" asked Hedwig.

"It was quite right," said Nino. "He ought to know, of course. And what did you tell him?"

"Nothing especial, Nino mio. He went away in a sort of ill temper because I would not let him abuse you as much as he pleased."

"He may abuse me and be welcome," said Nino. "He has some right to be angry with me. But he will think differently some day." So we chatted away for an hour, enjoying the

rest and the peace and the sweet sunshine of the Easter afternoon. But this was the day of interruptions. There was one more visitor to come,—one more scene for me to tell you, and then I have done.

A carriage drove down the street and seemed to stop at the door of my house. Nino looked idly out of the window. Suddenly he started.

"Hedwig, Hedwig!" he cried, "here is your father coming back!" She would not look out, but stood back from the window, turning pale. If there was one thing she dreaded, it was a meeting with her father. All the old doubt as to whether she had done right seemed to come back to her face in a moment. But Nino turned and looked at her, and his face was so triumphant that she got back her courage, and clasping his hand bravely awaited what was to come.

I went myself to the door, and heard Lira's slow tread on the stairs. Before long he appeared, and glanced up at me from the steps, which he climbed, one at a time, with his stick.

"Is my daughter here?" he asked, as soon as he reached me; and his voice sounded subdued,

just as Nino's did when Benoni had gone. I conducted him into the room. It was the strangest meeting. The proud old man bowed stiffly to Hedwig, as though he had never before seen her. They also bent their heads, and there was a silence as of death in the sunny room.

"My daughter," said Von Lira at last, and with evident effort, "I wish to have a word with you. These two gentlemen—the younger of whom is now, as I understand it, your husband —may well hear what I wish to say."

I moved a chair so that he might sit down, but he stood up to his full height, as though not deigning to be older than the rest. I watched Hedwig, and saw how with both hands she clung to Nino's arm, and her lip trembled, and her face wore the look it had when I saw her in Fillettino.

As for Nino, his stern, square jaw was set, and his brows bent, but he showed no emotion, unless the darkness in his face and the heavy shadows beneath his eyes foretold ready anger.

"I am no trained reasoner, like Signor Grandi," said Lira, looking straight at Hedwig, "but I can say plainly what I mean, for all that. There

was a good old law in Sparta, whereby disobedient children were put to death without mercy. Sparta was a good country,—very like Prussia, but less great. You know what I mean. You have cruelly disobeyed me,—cruelly, I say, because you have shown me that all my pains and kindness and discipline have been in vain. There is nothing so sorrowful for a good parent as to discover that he has made a mistake."

(The canting old proser, I thought, will he never finish?)

"The mistake I refer to is not in the way I have dealt with you," he went on, "for on that score I have nothing to reproach myself. But I was mistaken in supposing you loved me. You have despised all I have done for you."

"Oh, father! How can you say that?" cried poor Hedwig, clinging closer to Nino.

"At all events, you have acted as though you did. On the very day when I promised you to take signal action upon Baron Benoni you left me by stealth, saying in your miserable letter that you had gone to a man who could both love and protect you."

"You did neither the one nor the other, sir," said Nino, boldly, "when you required of your daughter to marry such a man as Benoni."

"I have just seen Benoni; I saw him also on the night you left me, madam,"—he looked severely at Hedwig,—"and I am reluctantly forced to confess that he is not sane, according to the ordinary standard of the mind."

We had all known from the paper of the suspicion that rested on Benoni's sanity, yet somehow there was a little murmur in the room when the old count so clearly stated his opinion.

"That does not, however, alter the position in the least," continued Lira, "for you knew nothing of this at the time I desired you to marry him, and I should have found it out soon enough to prevent mischief. Instead of trusting to my judgment you took the law into your own hands, like a most unnatural daughter, as you are, and disappeared in the night with a man whom I consider totally unfit for you, however superior," he added, glancing at Nino, "he may have proved himself in his own rank of life."

Nino could not hold his tongue any longer.

It seemed absurd that there should be a battle of words when all the realities of the affair were accomplished facts; but for his life he could not help speaking.

"Sir," he said, addressing Lira, "I rejoice that this opportunity is given me of once more speaking clearly to you. Months ago, when I was betrayed into a piece of rash violence, for which I at once apologised to you, I told you under somewhat peculiar circumstances that I would yet marry your daughter, if she would have me. I stand here to-day with her by my side, my wedded wife, to tell you that I have kept my word, and that she is mine by her own free consent. Have you any cause to show why she is not my wedded wife? If so, show it. But I will not let you stand there and say bitter and undeserved things to this same wife of mine, abusing the name of father and the terms 'authority' and 'love,' forsooth! And if you wish to take vengeance on me personally, do so if you can. I will not fight duels with you now, as I was ready to do the day before yesterday. For then—so short a time ago—I had but

offered her my life, and so that I gave it for her I cared not how nor when. But now she has taken me for hers, and I have no more right to let you kill me than I have to kill myself, seeing that she and I are one. Therefore, good sir, if you have words of conciliation to speak, speak them; but if you would only tell her harsh and cruel things, I say you shall not!"

As Nino uttered these hot words in good, plain Italian, they had a bold and honest sound of strength that was glorious to hear. A weaker man than the old count would have fallen into a fury of rage, and perhaps would have done some foolish violence. But he stood silent, eying his antagonist coolly, and when the words were spoken he answered.

"Signor Cardegna," he said, "the fact that I am here ought to be to you the fullest demonstration that I acknowledge your marriage with my daughter. I have certainly no intention of prolonging a painful interview. When I have said that my child has disobeyed me, I have said all that the question holds. As for the future of you two, I have naturally nothing more to say

about it. I cannot love a disobedient child, nor ever shall again. For the present, we will part; and if at the end of a year my daughter is happy with you, and desires to see me, I shall make no objection to such a meeting. I need not say that if she is unhappy with you my house will always be open to her, if she chooses to return to it."

"No, sir, most emphatically, you need not say it!" cried Nino, with blazing eyes. Lira took no notice of him, but turned to go.

Hedwig would try once more to soften him, though she knew it was useless.

"Father," she said, in tones of passionate entreaty, "will you not say you wish me well? Will you not forgive me?" She sprang to him and would have held him back.

"I wish you no ill," he answered, shortly, pushing her aside, and he marched to the door, where he paused, bowed as stiffly as ever, and disappeared.

It was very rude of us, perhaps, but no one accompanied him to the stairs. As for me, I would not have believed it possible that any human being could be so hard and relentlessly

virtuous; and if I had wondered at first that Hedwig should have so easily made up her mind to flight, I was no longer surprised when I saw with my own eyes how he could treat her.

I cannot, indeed, conceive how she could have borne it so long, for the whole character of the man came out, hard, cold, and narrow,—such a character as must be more hideous than any description can paint it, when seen in the closeness of daily conversation. But when he was gone the sun appeared to shine again, as he had shone all day, though it had sometimes seemed so dark. The storms were in that little room.

As Lira went out, Nino, who had followed Hedwig closely, caught her in his arms, and once more her face rested on his broad breast. I sat down and pretended to be busy with a pile of old papers that lay near by on the table, but I could hear what they said. The dear children, they forgot all about me.

"I am so sorry, dear one," said Nino, soothingly.

"I know you are, Nino. But it cannot be helped."

"But are you sorry, too, Hedwig?" he asked, stroking her hair.

"That my father is angry? Yes. I wish he were not," said she, looking wistfully toward the door.

"No, not that," said Nino. "Sorry that you left him, I mean."

"Ah, no, I am not sorry for that. Oh, Nino, dear Nino, your love is best." And again she hid her face.

"We will go away at once, darling," he said, after a minute, during which I did not see what was going on. "Would you like to go away?"

Hedwig moved her head to say "Yes."

"We will go, then, sweetheart. Where shall it be?" asked Nino, trying to distract her thoughts from what had just occurred. "London? Paris? Vienna? I can sing anywhere now, but you must always choose, love."

"Anywhere, anywhere; only always with you, Nino, till we die together."

"Always, till we die, my beloved," he repeated. The small white hands stole up and clasped about his broad throat, tenderly drawing his face to hers, and hers to his. And it will be "always," till they die together, I think.

This is the story of that Roman singer whose great genius is making such a stir in the world. I have told it to you, because he is my own dear boy, as I have often said in these pages; and because people must not think that he did wrong to carry Hedwig von Lira away from her father, nor that Hedwig was so very unfilial and heartless. I know that they were both right, and the day will come when old Lira will acknowledge it. He is a hard old man, but he must have some affection for her; and if not, he will surely have the vanity to own so famous an artist as Nino for his son-in-law.

I do not know how it was managed, for Hedwig was certainly a heretic when she left her father, though she was an angel, as Nino said. But before they left Rome for Vienna there was a little wedding, early in the morning, in our parish church, for I was there; and De Pretis, who was really responsible for the whole thing, got some of his best singers from St. Peter and St. John on the Lateran to come and sing a mass over the two. I think that our good Mother

Church found room for the dear child very quickly, and that is how it happened.

They are happy and glad together, those two hearts that never knew love save for each other, and they will be happy always. For it was nothing but love with them from the very first, and so it must be to the very last. Perhaps you will say that there is nothing in this story either but love. And if so, it is well; for where there is naught else there can surely be no sinning, or wrong-doing, or weakness, or meanness; nor yet anything that is not quite pure and undefiled.

Just as I finish this writing, there comes a letter from Nino to say that he has taken steps about buying Serveti, and that I must go there in the spring with Mariuccia and make it ready for him. Dear Serveti, of course I will go.

THE END.

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